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**ABSTRACT**

**VITALITY IN THE LOCAL CHURCH:**

**SPIRITUAL FORMATION AND LAY LEADERSHIP**

by

Thomas C. Mabry

The current state of the United Methodist Church has been well documented. From books by bishops and pastors to advice from consultants inside and outside the church, sources of information about the decline of the United Methodist Church are many and varied. Annual conferences and local churches across the connection have attempted to regain vitality with limited success. The challenges faced by leadership teams who are attempting to revitalize their local churches are significant, and spiritual maturity is required to navigate the often stormy transition from decline to vitality.

This project evaluated the impact on the lay members of the Mineral Springs United Methodist Church Administrative Council and their willingness to lead change as a result of a two-part intervention that took place at Mineral Springs United Methodist Church, located in Mineral Springs, North Carolina. First, the current state of the church was evaluated using Dan R. Dick's *Congregational Vitality Assessment*. The participants completed the survey individually, and then reviewed overall results following the completion of the pre intervention instrument. Second, the Administrative Council participated in a four-week spiritual formation experience. Pre- and postintervention instruments determined the degree of change regarding participants' spirituality and willingness to lead change within the members of the Administrative Council as a result of the intervention.

The project produced four findings related to the spirituality of lay leaders in the local church and the impact of leading change. Recommendations built on these findings, primarily at the local church level, are applicable across the Methodist connection. With consideration given for church size and ministry context, the recommendations would be helpful in assisting a local church in a move towards vitality in its life and ministry.

## DISSERTATION APPROVAL

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VITALITY IN THE LOCAL CHURCH:  
SPIRITUAL FORMATION AND LAY LEADERSHIP

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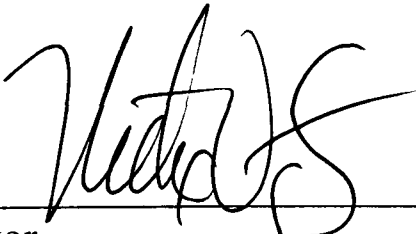
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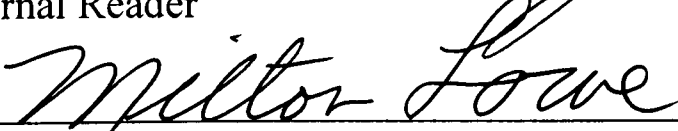
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SPIRITUAL FORMATION AND LAY LEADERSHIP

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of  
Asbury Theological Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Ministry

by

Thomas C. Mabry

May 2015

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Thomas Coleman Mabry

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **PROBLEM**

#### **Introduction**

The phenomenal growth of Methodism, in England and in the States, has been well documented. “In the annals of American history, no religious organization has soared from virtual insignificance to the domination of the religious landscape as quickly as Methodism. From 1784 to 1884, the population grew sixteen-fold, but Methodism grew 500-fold” (qtd. in Payne 1). The Methodist church once enjoyed a position of prominence and power, growing so fast that Bishop Thomas Coke said in a 1791 letter to a Presbyterian Bishop that the church was “larger than you could possibly conceive” (qtd. in Payne 4). At the church’s first centennial, Methodism has sixty conferences, 928,320 members, 10,015 churches, and more than 15,000 preachers (104). In terms of numerical growth, Methodism outran every other denomination even though Methodism was virtually the last one to arrive (Norwood 61). Methodism was by far the fastest growing denomination, averaging a 139.7 percent increase in membership per decade from 1780 through 1840 (Payne 2).

Sadly, the growth has stopped. The rate of growth began to slow after 1900, averaging only 18 percent per decade through the 1950s. Increase turned into decrease beginning in 1980 with a drop in membership of 10.8 percent during the next decade, according to the denominations General Commission on History and Archives (“United Methodist Membership Statistics”). In the middle of this decade, Bishop Richard B. Wilkie said the denomination was “sick unto death” (9). From 1950 through 2010, the church’s membership fell by an average of 8.05 percent per decade, again according to

the United Methodist General Committee on Archives and History (“United Methodist Membership Statistics”). In real numbers, the denomination lost 721,990 members during the decade ending in 2010, according to the denomination’s General Conference on Finance and Administration (6).

John Wesley was prophetic in 1786 when he said, “I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist in either Europe or America. But I am afraid, lest they only exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power” (315). Wesley would probably describe the ministry life in many of today’s United Methodist churches as having lost the power while retaining the form. Far too many churches report zero professions of faith for years on end, few or no baptisms, and are dependant on the conference for financial life support, euphemistically named equitable compensation. Dan R. Dick asserts that this situation came about as many churches have “abandoned the fundamental tenets of faith, theology and polity that gave them their identity in the first place” (7). The well-known *Reveal* study, done by Willow Creek Community Church, reported that 25 percent of Willow’s members who claim to be “close to Christ” or “Christ-centered” say they are “stalled” in their spiritual growth (“What Reveal Reveals”). For whatever reason, spiritual formation is not getting the masses to the point of maturity in many mainline churches, and the Church universal is suffering as a result.

The reasons for this well-documented decline are many and complex. Problems cited as reasons for the decline include clergy burnout, secularization, neighborhood transitions, economic downturns, competition from secular activities such as school and hobbies, divisions over styles of worship, and irrelevant or lack of missions beyond the

church. No doubt the complexities and pace of modern life contributes to the decline of the church.

John Flowers and Karen Vanhoy cite a reason for the decline that is as specific as it is true. In referring to a dynamic that occurs all too frequently as churches today try to identify the problems leading to the decline they experience in their local churches, they state, “None of the problems identified the one element about which they could actually do something: themselves” (xvii). John Wesley had a similar dynamic in mind as he wrote about the minimal impact of faith in the life of the Christian. Two years before his death in 1791, John Wesley lamented the poor spiritual condition of many in the Methodist movement:

Why has Christianity done so little good, even among us? Among the Methodists—among them that hear and receive the whole Christian doctrine, and that have Christian discipline added thereto, in the most essential parts of it? Plainly, because we have forgot, or at least not duly attended to, those solemn words of our Lord, “If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me” (“Causes”).

Vanhoy and Flowers and Wesley focused on the last place many tend to look for the solution to a difficult problem—ourselves.

Along with Flowers and Vanhoy, Wesley himself pointed to a foundational issue that still plagues the church today—a lack of deep spirituality: “One can spend an adult lifetime reading, teaching, thinking and writing about God and have no vital *experience* of God, no sense of God’s presence” (original emphasis; qtd. in Maas and O’Donnell 11). The degree of faith present in many pews today is speculative, not experiential. As a result the reality of God has become hypothetical even for many who would answer affirmatively if asked if they considered themselves Christian (Bloesch 13).



Congregations may enthusiastically sing the words of William D. Longstaff's great hymn, "Take time to be holy, speak oft with thy Lord", but the reality Monday through Saturday is far different for most of today's church attendees when analyzing their personal spiritual practices (*The United Methodist Hymnal*, 365). Intentional spiritual formation has become the exception rather than the rule (Barna, *Revolution* 55). Barna's discussion of the current spiritual condition of many Christians includes a quote from James Houston in which Houston calls the current spiritual condition of many in the church the "pseudo-simplicity of being a Christian" (133).

The culture that results from a shallow faith among laity and leadership alike typically displays a values gap. Human beings tend to develop a set of unspoken codes that drive behavior based on an often-subconscious set of values. The value gap becomes prevalent when the spoken set of codes does not match the observed behavior on the part of individuals in the group. Dick clearly states, "In survey after survey, United Methodists claim to be guided by values of acceptance, justice, generosity, and compassion, but the governing values of our *behaviors* are comfort, security, and the preservation of the familiar" (emphasis mine; 21). Without question, this dynamic is prevalent in today's United Methodist churches.

As a result of typically shallow faith and the values gap, church rank and file as well as those selected as leaders may have little more than a shallow faith from which to deal with the challenges of leadership in the local church. Taking Flowers and Vanhoy, Bloesch, and many other scholars' assertions as truth, churches are being led by laypeople who are spiritually starved: "Our churches are filled with laypersons haunted by a need they have difficulty naming, let alone satisfying" (Maas and O'Donnel 12). As

a result, churches lack the spiritual depth that would assist in making substantive evaluations of their current reality, let alone make the deep changes that would result in movement towards vitality. Even so, progress requires effective leadership by both clergy and laity: “The dynamics of success in a church are rooted in the motivational forces of the pastors and leaders. These have to change before anything else does” (Carlson and Lueken 49). The change to which these authors refer is growth in spiritual maturity.

The changes required to move a stagnant or declining congregation towards vitality are typically met with much resistance. Often, the mission Jesus gave to the church is undermined by the needs of people who already belong to the church: “The insistence that the church’s life be bent to the needs of the individual is active in every dying congregation. In the truest sense of the word, these church have become preference-centered churches, not purpose-centered churches” (Flowers and Vanhoy 128).

The lay leadership of any declining church will encounter resistance, ranging from mild verbal questioning to all-out war that can include withholding giving, threatening to leave the church, and publically calling the character of the pastor and leaders into question (Herrington, Bonem, and Furr 7). Enduring such abuse in order to make changes happen in a local church requires a solid spiritual foundation, formed only through personal spiritual formation (10). One key to successful spiritual formation is intentionality; Paul commonly refers to this intentionality as “walking in the Spirit” (Gal 5:16, NIV), be “led by the Spirit” (Gal. 5:18) and “keeping in step with the Spirit” (Gal. 5:25). The meaning here is clear: Christians do not drift into maturity (A. Jones 20).

Mineral Springs United Methodist Church was in the beginning stages of an investment in revitalization as this research project began. This study sought to evaluate the impact on the leaders and their willingness to lead change as a result of a two-part intervention at Mineral Springs United Methodist Church. First, an honest assessment of the current state of the church was completed using Dick's *Congregational Vitality Assessment* (127; see Appendix D). The church leadership team completed the survey individually, then met to review overall results. Second, the leadership team participated in a four-week spiritual formation experience. Pre- and postintervention instruments determined the degree of change regarding their own spirituality and willingness to lead change within the members of the leadership team as a result of the intervention.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this research project was to evaluate the changes in beliefs and attitudes of the members of the Mineral Springs United Methodist Church leadership team towards their own spiritual lives and the challenges of leading change as a result of an assessment of church vitality and a four-week experience in spiritual formation.

### **Research Questions**

In order to accomplish the goals set forth in the purpose statement, the completion of the *Congregational Vitality Assessment* (Dick 127) followed by initial and final surveys addressing the beliefs and attitudes of the Mineral Springs leadership team were utilized to answer the following research questions.

### **Research Question #1**

Prior to the *Congregational Vitality Assessment* and the spiritual formation experience, what were the beliefs and attitudes of Mineral Springs United Methodist Church leaders regarding their own spiritual lives and the challenges of leading change?

### **Research Question #2**

Following the *Congregational Vitality Assessment* and the spiritual formation experience, what were the beliefs and attitudes of Mineral Springs United Methodist Church leaders regarding their own spiritual lives and the challenges of leading change?

### **Research Question #3**

Which aspects of this experience contributed the most to the changes in participants' beliefs and attitudes regarding leading change?

### **Definition of Terms**

*Spiritual formation* is the continual work of God's Holy Spirit in response to an individual's intentional commitment, discipline, and action, resulting in personal growth in the image of Christ. The process of spiritual formation restores God's image in the life and being of an individual. Wesley's term *sanctification* is synonymous with spiritual formation.

*Intentionality* is the deliberate participation of an individual in an event or process. In the bounds of this project, intentionality is the deliberate, purposeful determination to participate in the commitment, discipline, and action required for spiritual formation. Christians must be intentional about the process of spiritual formation, or formation simply does not occur.

*Biblical self-understanding* is the optimal orientation of the life of a Christian, resulting from a person's intentional effort/decision to view his or her own life as formed by a relationship with Christ above all else. For proper spiritual formation to occur, an individual must come to understand the primacy of one's relationship with Christ: "Self-realization in the fullest Christian sense is therefore a sharing in the orientation which directs Christ, as Word, entirely to His Father" (Merton 1541). A biblical self-understanding is this self-realization—the awareness that who a person is comes from his or her grounding in Christ and the resulting transformation of self into a new creation by the working of the Holy Spirit, as opposed to self-understanding that comes from any source other than Christ.

*Vitality* is the state of being in a church that is both stable (having a strong ministry base that can endure change and disruption) and growing (in both numerical and spiritual terms). This state of being is the optimal condition for any church.

*Sustainability* is a holistic measure of a local church's structure and ministry in terms of its potential to remain vital over time.

*Leadership* is the exercise of a particular set of gifts in a setting where an individual has a position of influence over others.

### **Ministry Intervention**

The project was completed with the leadership team at Mineral Springs United Methodist Church during 2015. The study group included the members of the church's leadership team as defined by the Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church and the ministry structure at Mineral Springs.

The first phase was the researcher-designed initial survey that was taken anonymously by the leadership team to assess beliefs and attitudes regarding their own spiritual lives and their willingness to face the challenges of leading change. A quantitative section of this survey gathered demographic information about the individuals. This data set the baseline to allow for an analysis of the gap between pre- and postassessment findings. Prior to the completion of the initial survey, members of the leadership team gave their written agreement to be participants in the study by signing individual informed consent letters.

The second phase was the completion and review of the *Congregational Vitality Assessment* by members of the leadership team. This instrument provided a snapshot of the current condition of the life and ministry of the church in terms of growth and sustainability as defined by Dick in *Vital Signs*.

In the third phase, the leadership team participated in a four-week spiritual formation experience (see Appendix E). This experience was based on the dynamic of spiritual formation, the book of Ephesians, and this researcher's review of literature related to this study.

In the fourth phase of the project, the leadership team completed the researcher-designed final survey to assess beliefs and attitudes regarding their own spiritual lives and their willingness to face the challenges of leadership. This survey included qualitative questions designed to identify which aspects of the intervention contributed to changes from the pre- to postassessment findings.

In the fifth and final phase of the project, data was analyzed to produce findings and recommendations. Data is presented in Chapter 4 and the findings and recommendations are presented in Chapter 5.

### **Context**

Mineral Springs United Methodist Church is one of many churches in the Western North Carolina Conference suffering from the same decline as the denomination overall. According to annual charge conference records, average attendance peaked in 1992 at 366 but has fallen to 286 in 2013. Attendance was even lower in a number of the years between 1992 and 2013. Congregational giving has fallen short of the published budget in nine of the last ten years. The church is the embodiment of the 80/20 rule, with the few doing the work on behalf of the uninterested many.

Faced with the need to move towards health and sustainability, Mineral Springs provided an opportunity to measure the impact of using Dick's assessment to determine accurately the current degree of vitality of the church as well as an opportunity to measure beliefs and attitudes regarding the self-understanding of the laity who serve in leadership positions and their roles as leaders based on their reaction to the assessment as well as a spiritual formation experience based on the book of Ephesians.

Mineral Springs United Methodist Church is a 104 year-old church located in Mineral Springs, North Carolina, a town of 1,500 in Union County. Part of the Metro District of the Western North Carolina Conference of the United Methodist church, Mineral Springs is located eighteen miles due south of Charlotte, NC, just beyond Charlotte's residential and retail sprawl. Mineral Springs United Methodist Church was well-suited for this project for a number of reasons:

- Most in attendance can remember the years of growth, so the decline in attendance since is a visible indicator of the need for change.
- Congregational giving to the annual operating budget has fallen short of expectations; however, the church received a substantial unrestricted cash gift in 2006. A few small capital projects were paid for with funds from the gift with \$1.185 million remaining at the time of this writing.
- Overall, the people of the church say they want the church to experience growth again.

In summary, Mineral Springs United Methodist Church has enjoyed a season of numerical increase in the recent past, has the financial resources to invest in new directions, but has not been able to gain momentum.

Participation in the project was limited to the lay members of the church leadership team as defined by the *Book of Discipline*. While the entire body of the church is affected by change, the leaders of the church are responsible for leading the change. All members of the church are stakeholders in the life of the church, but the leadership team has a greater degree of influence and responsibility for maintaining the life of the church and moving it towards sustainability.

### **Methodology**

This explanatory mixed-methods research project was conducted around a four-week spiritual formation experience with the leadership team and Dick's *Congregational Vitality Assessment* (Dick 127). The project utilized a pre- and postassessment design with both quantitative and qualitative elements to determine with degree of vitality of Mineral Springs United Methodist Church as of the time of the project and to identify the



changes in beliefs and attitudes towards the participants' spiritual lives and their willingness to lead change.

The project's first phase was the anonymous collection of preintervention data using the researcher-designed initial survey. This survey was delivered via e-mail using SogoSurvey, an online provider of electronic survey distribution and data-gathering services. Participants were asked to complete the survey within one week. Data was collected and returned to me via SogoSurvey.

The second phase was the completion of Dick's *Congregational Vitality Assessment* (Dick 127). This assessment was completed individually in hard copy form. Participants were asked to complete the survey within one week. The results of the *Congregational Vitality Assessment* were reviewed together by the leadership team at a meeting scheduled for that purpose (127). The assessment provided an authentic perspective of the church's current condition in terms of vitality and stability.

Following the completion of the *Congregational Vitality Assessment*, members of the leadership team were invited to participate in a four-week spiritual formation experience in a small group setting. Each ninety-minute weekly session was offered on Sunday and again on Tuesday night to make attending each session easier for the participants to attend all of the four sessions.

The last step of data collection was the researcher-designed qualitative final survey. This survey was delivered via e-mail using SogoSurvey. Participants were asked to complete the survey within one week. Data was collected and delivered via SogoSurvey.

## Participants

The study group included the volunteer members of the church's 2015 leadership team as defined by the *Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church*. Employees of the church who serve on the leadership team, including the senior and associate pastors, the director of education, and the choir director, were not part of this study. Volunteer members of the leadership team included chairpersons of the trustees, finance, staff-parish relations, nurture, missions, connections, worship, and parsonage committees. The team also included two annual conference delegates, two student ministry leaders, a youth representative, and two at-large members.

## Instrumentation

***Congregational Vitality Assessment.*** The assessment came from Dan Dick's book, *Vital Signs: A Pathway to Congregational Wholeness* (127). The assessment was used to provide a snapshot of the life and ministry of Mineral Springs United Methodist Church in terms of growth and sustainability, the measures Dick offered as most effective in determining church vitality.

Members of the leadership team completed the anonymous survey in hard copy form. Then responses were compiled to identify the degree of vitality of the life and ministry of Mineral Springs United Methodist Church at the time of the Survey.

**Initial survey.** The researcher-designed anonymous initial survey gathered qualitative data in an online questionnaire format regarding members of the leadership team's beliefs and attitudes regarding their spiritual lives and their willingness to lead change. This survey also collected demographic data on the individuals participating in the survey.

The initial survey was distributed to participants electronically via SogoSurvey. SogoSurvey also provided anonymous data collection, report generation, and data analysis.

**Final survey.** The self-designed anonymous final survey gathered primarily qualitative data using an online questionnaire format regarding members of the leadership team's beliefs and attitudes about their spiritual lives and their willingness to lead change after the *Congregational Vitality Assessment* (Dick 127) and spiritual formation experience had been completed. This survey also collected qualitative data using open-ended questions in an online questionnaire format about the impact of the spiritual formation experience and the *Congregational Vitality Assessment* (Dick 127) on their beliefs and attitudes.

The final survey was distributed electronically by SogoSurvey. SogoSurvey also provided anonymous data collection, report generation, and data analysis.

## **Variables**

The independent variable was the four-week spiritual formation experience. Dependent variables include the beliefs and attitudes of the leadership team members. Intervening variables included a lack of attendance in the spiritual formation experience, a personal predisposition against change, and potential issues with the appointed pastor about unrelated concerns that affected survey answers. The study controlled for intervening variables as much as possible during the data analysis phase.

## Data Collection

The members of the 2015 Mineral Springs United Methodist Church leadership team comprised the study population. This population represented a homogenous sample for the purpose of qualitative analysis.

The demographic section of the initial survey included quantitative questions. For the qualitative sections of both surveys, participants answered open-ended questions to gather the desired data regarding their spiritual lives and willingness to lead change. Participants remained anonymous throughout the project. SogoSurvey distributed, compiled and returned data from the two researcher-designed instruments.

Each volunteer member of the leadership team received the *Congregational Vitality Assessment* in hard copy form with a one-week deadline for completion (Dick 127). Then the participants received the initial survey via SogoSurvey's e-mail function with a one-week deadline for completion. At the end of the four-week spiritual formation experience, the participants received the final survey via SogoSurvey's e-mail function with a one-week deadline for completion.

## Data Analysis

Each response category in the Likert-scale section of the surveys were assigned a numeric score. Then a codebook was developed and used to score the responses for each survey separately. Research Question #1 was answered using qualitative data from the initial survey. Research Question #2 was answered using qualitative data from both the initial and final surveys. Research Question #3 was answered using qualitative data from the final survey.

SogoSurvey's online data analysis tools were used in developing answers for all three research questions. The findings were presented using a narrative discussion, along with comparison and demographic tables.

### **Generalizability**

Mineral Springs is one of thousands of United Methodist churches in the midst of decline. The results of this study may be applicable across the United Methodist connection.

While change impacts the entire congregation of any given church, the responsibility for leading change lies with leadership. For this reason, the scope of this project included only the Mineral Springs United Methodist Church's leadership team. In applying the results of this project in another church setting, care must be taken to control for contextual differences such as size, financial position, pastoral tenure, and geographic setting in order to maximize effectiveness.

According to Rev. Brenda Newman, formerly a congregational vitality strategist on the Western North Carolina Conference staff, Mineral Springs United Methodist Church is the first church in the Western North Carolina Conference to conduct an assessment using Dick's work (127). While Dick's *Congregational Vitality Assessment* and supporting resources are currently not among the tools offered by the conference's Office of Church Vitality, the results of this project may encourage the office to add Dick's work to the resources provided to local churches seeking revitalization.

### **Theological Foundation**

This project is based on the dynamic of spiritual formation and the resulting change in the life and being of the individual and the collective individuals in the local

church. Spiritual formation is the ongoing process of growth in an individual's spiritual life, empowered by God's Holy Spirit as he or she intentionally participates in the human practices of devotion, study, and prayer in connection with God. In his sermon "The Scripture Way of Salvation," John Wesley referred to the resulting personal growth in the image of Christ as sanctification. Humankind was created in the image of God, suffered the destruction of that image and relationship with God through sin, and can experience the restoration and maturation of that image through partnership with the work of Holy Spirit as a gift of grace from God.

The concept of spiritual formation was not a part of the creation narrative. Every aspect of God's work, including humankind, was perfectly formed at the moment of creation, so no further refining action was needed. The need for spiritual formation—or more accurately *re*-formation—did not exist until after the Fall as recorded in Genesis 3. The fall, the second event in Robert G. Tuttle and William R. Cannon's "good news-bad news-good news" description of the Wesleyan view of the story, resulted in broken relationships between humankind and God, between humankind and creation and within an individual (170). Every aspect of creation, except the Creator, was marred by the entry of sin into the world at the hands of Adam and Eve. Nature, humanity, and relationships at all levels were warped out of their initial state of perfection by virtue of humankind's misguided use of God-given free will. The church exists in this same fallen state as any institution overseen by imperfect human beings.

The need for spiritual formation entered the story of humanity at the point of the Fall. God's love for his creation would not allow his creation to remain in this state of brokenness, so Jesus became the final good news. Christ's sacrificial atonement for

human sin is the divine step that enabled reconciliation of human relationships with God and creation and the restoration of the image of God in humanity. In total, God's action towards humanity is aimed at the restoration of humanity in God's image.

Wesley's description of the work of spiritual formation is a central theological theme in Methodism. God's work of grace by faith begins as God awakens the need for forgiveness and a relationship with God through the work of prevenient grace, makes a person righteous at the moment of salvation through the work of justifying grace, and works in partnership with an individual's intentional commitment, discipline, and actions to lead them to spiritual maturity through the work of sanctification. Spiritual formation begins in earnest following *metanoia*, the Greek noun often translated *conversion* but more accurately translated as *repentance* (Holmes 180). The term signifies not only a change of mind but a change of heart as well (Bloesch 77). Wesley's focus in total was on an individual's conduct, not doctrine.

Wesley viewed *metanoia* as the entry point into Christianity, and required that all converts be nurtured so that their faith matured over time. The people who were converted to faith as a result of his preaching were invited to grow in spiritual maturity by participation in Wesley's three-tiered structure—the society, the class, and the band.

For Wesley, a Methodist is one who puts his or her entire being into serving the Lord, mind and body alike. "Agreeable to this his one desire, is the one desire of his life, namely, not to do his own will, but the Will of Him that sent him" (Wesley, "The Character of a Methodist," 4). The basis of love and service to God is that God loved us first, so our lives should be spent in heartfelt, disciplined response. "We love because God first loved us. And if we are to love God in return, we must keep his law, which is to

love him with our whole being, and our neighbor as ourselves” (Wakefield 21). Reaching this achievement meant living a disciplined, methodical life. The end result of such a life is happiness, a goal Wesley for believed, for which every person longed. He defines happiness as “the way of pleasantness, the path to calm, joyous peace,... joy, happiness, blessedness, love are all interchangeable. Real happiness is only found in God” (qtd. in Mercer 2). Wesley’s life was spent working to establish the environment in a church system where people could live such a life and experience this happiness, and he believed that spiritual growth within such a system should be the norm for every believer (Henderson 114).

The book of Ephesians, Paul’s circular letter intended for several churches, incorporates in one writing the good news-bad news-good news dynamic of the creation and restoration story of God and the resulting responsibility of Christians as members of Christ’s church. Paul addresses humanity’s death due to sin, the gift of God’s grace through Christ that restores Christians from death into loved members of God’s own household, humanity’s individual calling to be an active part of the body of Christ, the gifts Christians are given through the Holy Spirit, and the purpose and environment for using those same gifts and the rules for living as new creations. The body of Paul’s work in Ephesians serves to revisit the story of the Creation, Fall, and restoration of humanity as both individual and corporate instruction is provided for believers struggling to recognize and use their gifts.

Paul summarizes the purpose for which believers receive gifts: “to equip the saints for the work of the ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the



measure of the full stature of Christ” (Eph. 4:12-14, NRSV). Clearly, Wesley echoed Paul’s intent in the practice of Methodism such that Henry Bett wrote these words 150 years after Wesley’s death: “The stress has always been, in Methodist theology, upon the redeeming love of God in Christ, and the work of the Holy Spirit; upon repentance, and faith, and conversion, and fellowship, and holiness” (93). The result of such a dynamic is termed “practical divinity” by the *Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church* (102). The church is the community of individuals who collectively make up the “experiential realization of the gospel of Jesus Christ in the lives of Christian people” (54). In the Wesleyan perspective, the life of a Christian is one of intentional focus on Christ and the living out of that focus as one is continually formed in the image of Christ.

Given the decline of the Methodist denomination that has already been discussed, the issues facing a local church attempting to regain vitality are considerable and complex. Leaders in the church must have a healthy degree of spiritual maturity in order to face the challenges of regaining vitality in a church “with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:2-3). Greater spiritual maturity allows a leader to see both the work of the church and the individuals in the church through the eyes of Christ rather than from a human point of view. The work of regaining vitality and a willingness on the part of leaders to endure the difficulties of change is overdue in most of our Methodist congregations.

In summary, church leaders need to focus on their own spiritual growth in order to lead effectively. Being members of a Methodist church, spiritual growth should not be viewed as an option. Combined with an honest assessment regarding the state of vitality

in the life and ministry of the church, growth in spiritual maturity on the part of the lay members of the church leadership team should manifest itself in a positive change in beliefs and attitudes regarding their own spiritual lives and their own willingness to be leaders of change.

### **Overview**

This project was undertaken to determine the impact of Dick's *Congregational Vitality Assessment* (127) and a spiritual formation experience on the beliefs and attitudes regarding their spiritual lives and their roles as leaders of change by lay members of Mineral Springs United Methodist Church's 2015 leadership team. Chapter 2 provides the literature review to support the project. Chapter 3 provides extensive details on project methodology. Chapter 4 presents the research data. Chapter 5 presents and discusses recommendations.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE**

#### **Introduction**

Like many other United Methodist churches, Mineral Springs has been relatively stagnant for more than a decade in terms of membership, attendance and financial giving. This project was undertaken in order to evaluate the impact of a four-week spiritual formation experience and an assessment of church vitality on the beliefs and attitudes of lay members of Mineral Springs United Methodist Church's leadership team towards their own spiritual lives and the challenges of leadership. The assertion being tested was that deeper spirituality and an accurate assessment of the state of the church resulted in more willingness to embrace the challenges of church leadership.

The purpose of this research project was to evaluate the changes in beliefs and attitudes of the members of the Mineral Springs United Methodist Church leadership team towards their own spiritual lives and challenges of leading change as a result of an assessment of church vitality and a four-week experience in spiritual formation.

#### **Theological Framework**

This project is based on the dynamic of positive spiritual formation and the resulting change in the life and being of the individual and the collective individuals in leadership roles in the local church. Spiritual formation is the work of God in partnership with an individual's intentional focus and action that results in the growth of the whole person in the image of Christ and in relationship with other individuals. The concept comes from a number of Scriptural sources, including the words of Paul in Galatians 4:19: "My dear children, for whom I am in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed

in you.” Paul’s use of the word *morphoo`*, translated into the English *formed*, describes the process of becoming Christlike as a metamorphosis in essential nature, not merely in outward form (LeClerc and Maddix 11). In true spiritual formation, the entire individual is transformed.

Wesley uses the term *sanctification* to describe this process of spiritual maturation. While humanity was created in the image of God, that perfect image was marred when Adam and Eve chose themselves over God. In addition, humanity’s relationship with God was warped as well. Humanity can experience the restoration and maturation of that image through partnership with the work of Holy Spirit as a gift of grace from God. Wesley’s treatment of grace as a process—prevenient, justifying, and then sanctifying—illuminates God’s work in partnership with the individual in reaching maturity.

The contemporary concept of spiritual formation was not a part of the creation narrative. Every aspect of God’s work, including humanity, was perfectly formed at the moment of creation, so no further refining action was needed. This perfection was made immanent in Adam through the creative action of God, the action that breathed life into what was formerly a collection of dirt and dust. Adam was not a mere reflection of what God appeared to be. Instead, Adam was an instantiated reality of the image of God in physical form. Thomas Merton captures the essence of this creative event:

The creation of Adam was not only a giving of life, but also a giving of love and wisdom, so that at the very moment in which he came into being, Adam was, by virtue of the supernatural and preternatural gifts which accompanied all his gifts of nature, in some sense inspired. (477).

This degree of inspired perfection, made by the hands of God for the purpose of governing the world as an effective instrument and imitator of God the Father, was

complete not in and of itself, but only in continual, intimate relationship to God. No further refinement of either the created or the relationships in which the created lived was possible.

Humanity's need for spiritual formation began following the Fall. The need to be restored in relationship with God, with other people, with creation and even within oneself was a direct result of the end of the perfect state of creation. David Benner describes the impact of the Fall on humanity:

Created from love and for love, humans—according to the Christian account of things—spurned God's love in favor of what was perceived to be freedom. The result, of course, was disastrous. Liberty was instantly replaced by bondage, intimacy by alienation. Genuine love was reduced to self-love, and the result was egocentricity and estrangement from our deepest self, God and others. (23)

Merton says that Adam and Eve believed a lie that robbed them of innocence and replaced it with the power to know evil not only speculatively but by personal experience (688). Absent God's work of spiritual formation, this state of abject brokenness has been the normative condition for humankind since the events of Genesis 3 took place. The church exists in this same fallen state as an institution overseen by imperfect mankind. As a result, the church suffers from the same struggles as secular institutions. Jealousy, cheating, stealing, abuse, and the rest of the list of actions that come from human darkness are alive and well in the church.

God's love for his creation would not allow his creation to remain in state of brokenness, so Jesus became the final good news. Christ's sacrificial atonement for human sin is the divine step that enabled reconciliation of the human relationship with God and creation and the restoration of the image of God in humanity. In total, God's action towards humanity is aimed at the restoration of God's image in all that God's

image entails. This restoration results in a new creation, not just a better human being.

Merton speaks of the new creation:

Jesus not only teaches us the Christian life, He creates it in our souls by the action of His Spirit. Our life in Him is not a matter of mere ethical goodwill. It is not mere moral perfection. It is an entirely new spiritual reality, an inner transformation. (1496)

First John 3:2 says, in part, “But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is” (NIV). Spiritual formation is the journey that makes Christians like Christ. Dallas Willard says spiritual disciplines are “the conditions upon which our spiritual life is made indubitably real” (*Spirit* 26). Willard and others contribute individual perspectives of the intentional participation in physical activities that produce, in partnership with the Holy Spirit, spiritual growth.

### **Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians**

The book of Ephesians, called the “Queen of the Epistles” by William Barclay, is considered by many to the pinnacle of New Testament thought (71). Paul wrote the book from prison, as evidenced his referring to himself as “a prisoner for Christ” in 3:1, “a prisoner for the Lord” in 4:1, and “an ambassador in chains,” and in 4:1 (Eph., NRSV). Paul’s passionate retelling of the creation, fall and restoration of humanity gives readers an understanding of God’s redemptive desire for his creation. He provides clear instructions for living as a representative of Christ, with forgiveness and kindness being the standard for relationships (4:32-32). Paul also addresses individual and corporate responsibilities for participation in the body of Christ as well as an explanation of the nature and uses of spiritual gifts (4:11-13).

According to Paul, Christians receive gifts for the purpose of participating in the life of the church towards the end of unity and maturity (Eph. 4:11-13). Authors dealing

with spiritual formation throughout the history of the Christian church have worked and reworked this process of maturation in Christ in language and imagery they considered appropriate for their audiences. However, the foundational move being described remains the same—God’s people intentionally devoting time and resources to partner with God for growth and holiness.

### **The Wesleyan View of Holiness**

The central theological issue in Methodism is the work of spiritual formation in the life of the individual and the state of being that results. Spiritual formation begins for an individual when he or she becomes aware of a need for a forgiving relationship with God, a dynamic Wesley believed happened as a result of what he termed prevenient grace. Following the individual’s acceptance of a God’s forgiveness, an act Wesley believed was a moment of justifying grace, he or she begins a lifelong journey of growing in holiness as the result of participating with God’s sanctifying grace.

Wesley went to great lengths to include the concept of personal happiness as a result of proper spiritual formation. Albert Outler referred to Wesley’s connecting of holiness and happiness as “one of Wesley’s most consistent themes” (qtd. in S. Jones 207). In more than thirty sermons, Wesley says that holiness is the only way a person can be truly happy. Holiness and happiness were part of God’s original plan but were warped in the Fall. God restores his image in humanity through sanctification and happiness is regained through the very same process (208). Wesley wrote about happiness in “The Character of a Methodist:” “He is therefore happy in God, yea always happy, as having in him, ‘a well of water springing up into everlasting life,’ and overflowing his soul with

peace and joy.” Salvation was more than just a change of heart for Wesley. Salvation was a change of the entire person (Bloesch 77).

Salvation is the entry point into this journey of all-encompassing transformation. Wesley wanted to ensure that the people who came to faith under his ministry had every opportunity to be nurtured in their faith, so he created a three-tiered structure to provide for guidance and further teaching—the society, the class, and the band. Individuals who participated in these groups demonstrated their desire for further spiritual growth.

One cannot discuss Wesleyan holiness without addressing Wesley’s beliefs regarding Christian perfection. Much has been written about Wesley’s intent regarding the use of the term *perfection*, but Scott J. Jones provides one of the most concise explanations:

When love so motivates the believer that all voluntary actions, both inward and outward, are motivated by the love demanded and promised by this commandment [the Great Commission from Matt. 28] then the moral image of God has been restored. Wesley believed this was possible in this life by God’s grace. (210)

The *Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church* includes “Sanctification and Perfection” as a section heading under “Our Doctrinal Heritage” (102). The section includes a definition from Wesley on Christian perfection:

New birth is the first step in this process of sanctification. Sanctifying grace draws us toward the gift of Christian perfection, which Wesley described as a heart “habitually filled with the love of God and neighbor” and as “having the mind of Christ and walking as he walked (51).

Christian perfection is the goal for every Christian, possible only in partnership with God’s Holy Spirit in the activities of spiritual formation.



For Wesley, perfection comes at the work of God through the process of spiritual formation. Over time, a Christian who remains devoted to the work of his or her own spiritual formation can experience a restoration of the image of God in their lives and see a transformation in spirit, heart, body, thoughts and actions. The church is the body of individuals where the spiritual formation that results in perfection takes place. The church succeeds in achieving the perfection the degree the church body is intentional regarding the disciplines of spiritual formation and lives accordingly.

Wesley published a tract in 1742 titled “The Character of a Methodist,” which details what Wesley believed were the characteristics of a mature Christian in Wesleyan terms. He wrote the tract to answer questions being asked about who Methodists really were. Wesley describes the characteristics of a mature Christian life, listing happiness, hope, prayer, love, gentleness, sincerity, obedience, growth, witness and faithfulness as the visible evidence that should be present in a mature Christian. The foundational mark of a Christian is one who has “the love of God shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Ghost given unto him.” From this foundation, the characteristics listed above should become evident as maturity develops over time, recognizing that the life Wesley is describing is more an “agenda for spiritual growth than a statement of an accomplished fact” (Mercer viii). These actualization of these goals in the life of many in today’s Methodist church must be called into question as one considers the results of Dick’s *Congregational Vitality Assessment* in the many churches Dick assessed.

Jerry L. Mercer repackaged Wesley’s tract in “Being Christian: A United Methodist Vision for the Christian Life”. Mercer puts Wesley’s tract in modern terms, writing much of the content in letters to his son-in-law Robert in hopes that Robert would

“catch the Methodist spirit” (vii). I hope Mercer’s work succeeded with Robert, but it did not with me. While the specific Methodist bent may be lacking, I prefer Richard J. Foster or Willard’s treatment of much the same subject matter.

The challenges experienced by leaders in the local church can be significant. As a result, a depth of spiritual maturity is needed on the part of the leader. Greater spiritual maturity allows a leader to see both the work of the church and the individuals in the church through the eyes of Christ rather than from a human point of view. Doing so enables leaders to avoid being deeply affected by the rebuffs that typically result from attempts to make change in the church. Spiritual maturity allows the leaders, as St. Francis of Assisi said, “to wear the world like a loose garment, which touches us in a few places and there lightly” (qtd. in Willard *Renovation of the Heart* 72). The depth of a leader’s spiritual maturity is directly related to their ability to lead the local church effectively.

In summary, church leaders need to focus intentionally on their own spiritual growth in order to lead effectively. Combined with an honest assessment regarding the state of the church, growth in maturity on the part of the collective church leadership team should manifest itself in a positive change in beliefs and attitudes regarding their own spiritual lives and their own willingness to be leaders of change.

### **The Dynamic of Spiritual Formation**

Spiritual formation, or more accurately “trans-formation” as Dallas Willard states, comes at the hand of God (*Renovation of the Heart* 14). However, people are not inert receptacles of his transforming love, coasting through life as passive subjects of divine transformation until suddenly wholeness is achieved. Paul Pettit describes proper spiritual

formation as a “both/and approach,” including intentional human participation with God’s free gift of grace (47). Being transformed by God requires intentional action on the part of humanity to receive and internalize the changes that God truly desires to work in every human being. Brenner says, “When God thinks of us, he feels a deep, persistent longing—not simply for our wholeness but, more basically, for our friendship” (23). Provided an individual meets God’s desire for spiritual growth with intentional focus and maintained effort, the outpouring of God’s desire for friendship results in growth towards wholeness of life and heart. The goal of growth is to be restored in the image of Christ, the true image of God (Hoekma 73). David Coner describes holiness as a state of being:

Holiness is the state to which God is drawing the whole created order. God’s spirit, operating within the very fabric of creation, presses upon the world, seeking opportunities to share it and to form it, to direct it towards a destiny which he has in mind for it. To walk the way of holiness, for any individual Christian, is to try to “open up” to the Spirit of the Creator God, to provide a space for him to enter, so as to be charged with his energy towards the goal already revealed and reaching in Jesus Christ. (qtd. in Rademacher 127)

God desires restoration for all of his creation. Spiritual formation in the life and spirit of the individual is the means by which God accomplishes this restoration, done in partnership with the individual and the Holy Spirit.

Authentic spiritual formation is an all-encompassing endeavor, involving every aspect of being human:

The overall orientation of their will, the kinds of thoughts and feelings that occupy them, the “automatic” inclinations and “readinesses” of their body in action, the prevailing posture of their relations toward others, and the harmonious wholeness of their soul—these all, through the formative processes undergone by his disciples, increasingly come to resemble the personal dimensions of their Master. (Willard, *Renovation of the Heart* 152)

Proper spiritual formation requires the whole person, intentionally committed to the process of becoming Christlike in thought, action and behavior. The mind of Christ becomes the driving force of one's complete being, replacing the brokenness born in every heart and soul.

This restoration of the image of Christ in the human person moves that individual towards his or her own truest identity. This truest identity is found in relationship with God: "People flourish when they are able to make the connection between God and their truest self. The ground of their personhood is in God" (Riecke 34). Following Aquinas' belief that the spiritual soul is the ground of who human beings are and who they become, true personal identity is properly placed within the scope of shared spiritual formation between that individual and God (van Kaam and Muto 37). Leaders are best able to act in ways that are life-giving for themselves and the other people whose lives they touch when they are actively participating with God in their own spiritual formation. Leaders in the local church must give attention to their own self-understanding and seek to mature spiritually if they are to lead as effectively as possible. Flora Slosson Wueller writes eloquently about the need for spiritual formation:

No one taught me that if the branch detaches itself from the vine and tries to be a vine itself, it will wither and die. No one had pointed out that if a shepherd is not fed as well as the sheep, the shepherd will begin to starve and may even end up devouring the sheep. (20)

Nowhere in the local church is the impact of a failure to attend to the spiritual aspect of one's life more important than with leadership, both clergy and laity. The *Book of Discipline* places both responsibility and authority for the ministry life of the church in the hands of clergy and representative leaders of the laity, so failure to attend to the spiritual life can have profound effects on the church as a whole (52). Jim Herrington,

Mike Bonem, and James Furr make a powerful case that the life-giving power experienced together in church life is simply spiritual vitality (16): “Without this vitality, the church becomes like another organization or group of people” (17). Shallow spirituality, or no spirituality at all, is the driving force of decline in so many United Methodist congregations.

The challenges of postmodern life have complicated the process of maturation from both secular and sacred perspectives. Sociologists have historically monitored a series of consecutive social events that mark an individual’s journey to adulthood:

Leaving home, finishing school, finding a job, getting married and having children. In 1960, more than two-thirds of young adults had attained all five of these indicators by age 30. In 2000, less than half of females and less than a third of males had accomplished the same five accomplishments. (Wuthnow 21)

The reasons for this change are both social and cultural. The societal landscape that today’s young adults occupy is vastly different from that of the previous generation.

The typical support system enjoyed by those entering early adulthood in decades in the recent past included family support, psychological connections beyond the immediate family, and financial resources that exceeded the current norm. Alexandra Robbins and Abby Wilner describe today’s journey to adulthood as far less connected than previous generations, with many in their twenties experiencing fear, depression and emotional issues stemming from a lack of cultural and generational norms (42). While this analysis is related to cultural and social maturation, the impact on spiritual life can be considerable, as well.

Christian Smith calls the faith posture of emerging adults as a result of this tenuous support system “moralistic therapeutic deism” (*Soul Searching* 122). He defines

this perspective as “divinely underwritten happiness and interpersonal niceness,” a belief that results in a very shallow faith (124). This shallow faith perspective handicaps many in local church leadership, leaving them either unwilling or unable to cope with the challenges of leading significant changes towards vitality.

### **Understanding the Human Person**

An understanding of what it means to be human is a foundational requirement to further grasp the process of maturing in Christ’s likeness. Merton explains this concept clearly: “The fullness of human life cannot be measured by anything that happens only to the body” (55). Many others have written about the complex nature of a human being, but two contemporaries stand out in terms of clarity and applicability regarding spiritual formation—Willard and Peter Scazzero. Both authors break down the meaning of being human into its constituent parts. Willard lists “the six dimensions of the person” (*Spirit* 32). Scazzero challenges his readers to consider the fullness of what it means to be human as he explains what it means to be human using the descriptive phrase “components of who we are” to accomplish basically the same thing as Willard (18). Their work is instructional as to how spiritual formation is realized in the human person.

Scazzero lists five components in his description of the human person: emotional, physical, spiritual, intellectual, and social. His treatment of the human person in a chapter titled “Recognizing Tip-of-the Iceberg Spirituality,” intending to help his readers understand that none of these components can be ignored. Spiritual maturity, along with the corollary of emotional health, requires maturation of all five components. Failure to grow adequately in any single dimension shortchanges the whole. Scazzero’s work is instructional but fails to address fully the external factors that so clearly have a significant

influence on who a person becomes. While Scazzero lists *social* as one of the components, he fails to detail the full impact of forces outside the person. Willard's treatment of the subject provides a more comprehensive perspective.

Willard more fully addresses the operation of external forces in his description. In *Renovation of the Heart*, Willard claims that understanding is the basis of care, meaning a person can not adequately care for his or her own life until he or she understands what it means to be human (27). In his chapter "The Heart in the System of Human Life," he details these six human dimensions:

- Thought—Thought is the function that brings things to the minds of a human being through ways that include imagination and perception. Thought makes it possible to consider the things that are brought to mind and consider what these things are and how they may be connected to other things (32).
- Feeling—Feeling moves a person either closer to or further from the things that are considered through thought (32).
- Will (spirit, heart)—Volition is the exercise of will. It is the human ability to originate or create things that otherwise would not exist. This ability forms the spirit in a human being (33).
- Body—Human being is present in the physical world through their body. The body is also the means through which human beings are social (34).
- Social context —Human beings are created with a desire for relationships with other human beings. The most important relationship is with God (35).

- Soul—The soul interrelates all of the other dimensions into one life. As the deepest part of the self, the soul has the ability to operate without conscious supervision (36).

His inclusion of *social context* as a dimension of an individual places external forces and experiences at the appropriate level in the shaping of the human soul. Willard shows how human beings have been designed for social interaction. Humanity was created in the image of God, who is the ultimate model for relationships, as God exists perfectly in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. A human being's ability to live in relationship is limited by his or her finitude, but the desire for personal connectedness is a significant driver in the operation of the human person. This desire plays out in the formation of the spirit as human beings seek out, connect to, and learn from other persons. This interplay, or the lack of interplay, is significant in that every person is formed by his or her relationships. Diane J. Chandler describes this dynamic as being "continuously formed into the image of Jesus through social interactions and the life of the church, which invariably embedded within cultural contexts" (21). Given the relational desire present in every human being, formation can only occur within an individual's social environment.

These six dimensions exist in every human being, and every human being has undergone spiritual formation of some sort. Spiritual formation is not the exclusive privilege of the Christian; every human being has will, and that will takes shape as a result of interaction with the other five dimensions listed by Willard and the sum total of life experience. Billy Graham and Charles Manson both experienced spiritual formation, although in different directions. Both Graham and Manson had their wills connect to



some larger reality that became central in how they chose to live their lives, albeit with vastly different outcomes.

Willard correctly contends that human action is a result of the interplay between spirit, mind, body, social context, thought, and soul (*Spirit* 36). Actions typically result from pressure on the will from one or more dimensions of the self, not from a deliberate decision. This dynamic explains why persons are not able to transform themselves simply by an act of the will. Jesus was speaking about this truth when he said, “The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak” (Matt. 26:41; Mark 14:38). The will is not a singular force in determining action; the interplay of all six dimensions must be considered. Successful spiritual formation requires an understanding of the interconnected operation of all six dimensions as well as external forces.

Ideally, the will reaches out to God in a relationship. Through the relationship with God, the will is established in its God-intended place as second to God in the dynamic life of the human being. The relationship with God can then form the human self into the proper order of dimensions—God, spirit, mind, soul and body. A hierarchy exists in the dimensions of the human person that establishes priority of control. The body is the lowest level and exists when properly formed to serve the soul. The soul, properly formed, serves the mind. The mind properly serves the spirit, and the spirit serves God when an individual is fully committed to spiritual formation in his or her social context. (Willard *Renovation of the Heart* 41).

Absent a relationship of trust with God, the larger forces of the remaining human dimensions and beyond work to form the will into something less than the wholeness found only in God. As a result, the six dimensions are placed in the wrong order—body,

soul, mind, spirit, and God last. Willard refers to this situation of incorrect ordering as “the order of idolatry” (*Renovation* 40). This order, or something very similar, is the normative state for non-Christians and unfortunately, for most Christians. The work of spiritual formation serves to reset these dimensions into the proper order. Willard states that the proper ordering will never fully occur in this life “because of the social dimension of the self and our finitude and the total spiritual environment around us” (41). Even so, growth in the likeness of Christ can and does occur in a significant manner when one gives intentional focus to his or her spiritual life. Given the realities of humankind and our current social environment, Willard summarizes the work of spiritual formation:

Spiritual formation only happens as each essential dimension of the human being is transformed to Christlikeness under the direction of regenerate will interacting with constant overtures of grace from God. Such transformation is not the result of mere human effort and cannot be accomplished by putting pressure on the will (heart, spirit) alone. (42)

The core human requirement is intentionality. Each person who desires to grow spiritually must choose to make the investment of time, intellect, and resources to connect his or her will appropriately to God, in partnership with God who works his transformation in them as a gift of grace.

The Apostle Paul, John Wesley, and the more modern writers quoted here all echo the first commandment—“You must not have any other god but me” (Exod. 20:3, NLT). The most basic of all instructions in faithful living, the first commandment speaks to the need for every person to make the intentional decision to put God first and let all other aspects of life follow. The dynamic of spiritual formation is literally the individual *how* in response to the challenge of living out the first commandment.

## Soul Ruin

In describing the fallen state of man, Dallas Willard speaks of evil ruining a soul (*Renovation* 45). Understanding the degree of ruin is the necessary starting place in order to grasp the depth of change required to become whole again. Wesley believed that the spark of the divine could never be totally eradicated from the human soul. Sin may warp and deface the soul, but the spark of God remains. Merton describes this near-total destruction as each man being a single mirror of the divine nature of God being shattered into millions of fragments that alienated each human being from God, other human beings, and himself or herself (1364). Regardless of which analogy is used, the truth of sin's near-total destruction of the human person is clear.

The perfect state of God's original plan exists no more, except as a dream in the heart of fallen humanity. Benner says, "Deep down, however, something within us seems to remember the Garden in which we once existed,... the faint residual memories of the garden of love" (24-25). The beginning point for spiritual formation is the discovery and nurture of this memory of Eden. The memory serves as a signpost, both past and present, for the potential of transformation. Human beings recognize evil and sin when they see it, and the awfulness is apparent because they have a hardwired sense of paradise buried deep inside that they subconsciously use as a measuring stick. Human beings can understand brokenness because they have a memory of wholeness, even though they may have never experienced wholeness personally. Spiritual formation seeks to make the memory of wholeness a present reality.

## The Disciplines of Spiritual Formation

In his seminal work, Foster refers to the activities of spiritual formation as “disciplines,” indicating that human involvement in them must be intentional (1). He is correct in saying, “Spiritual disciplines are things that we do” (104). Human beings do not drift into maturity, human beings must intentionally choose to practice those activities that God uses to mature them. Furthermore, simply knowing what these activities entail and participating in them by rote does not lead to spiritual maturity. Foster, and many other authors, address the truth that these activities are “an inward and spiritual reality, and the inner attitude of the heart is far more crucial than the mechanics for coming into the reality of the spiritual life” (2). The human activity of spiritual disciplines engages the spirit of God in a way that results in changes every dimension of the human person.

Many authors writing about spiritual disciplines agree on what these activities entail. Foster divides twelve disciplines into three categories as follows:

- Inward disciplines—meditation, prayer, fasting, and study (15-30),
- Outward disciplines—simplicity, solitude, submission, and service (79-129); and,
- Corporate disciplines—confession, worship, guidance, and celebration (145-192).

In his book *Spiritual Formation: Following the Movements of the Spirit*, Henri Nouwen focuses on the process of formation over time rather than the specifics of the activities themselves. Nouwen proposes that the beginning point of spiritual formation is the realization that God is incomprehensible. While persons can mature and grow,

persons can never become “an expert in the things of God” (3). The best we can expect is *docta ignorantia*, or an “articulate not-knowing” (4). Having come to terms with human limitations in relationship with God, persons can proceed with a series of relationships that move them in the direction of Christ.

Nouwen divides the transformational journey into stages of life. “Early movements” include the relational shift previously described, prayer, and contemplation (4-12). “Midlife movements” are more vaguely described as journeys from sorrow to joy, resentment to gratitude, and fear to love (37-86). “Mature movements” include exclusion to inclusion and denying to befriending death (89-116). The activities required to accomplish these movements are much the same as those listed by Foster but presented in Nouwen’s more personal manner.

Across the spectrum of the classics of spiritual formation, from Foster to Hannah Whitall Smith to Detrich Bonhoeffer to C. S. Lewis to Willard to more recent writers such as Francis Chan, the process of spiritual formation is the same (Chan 23). Brokenness becomes wholeness as the individual partners with God in the intentional practice of a relatively short list of very human activities. While the authors describe the activities and the process in differing terms, they all share a common theme: God desires wholeness for humanity and is willing to partner with humanity both individually and corporately to accomplish the goal.

### **The Corporate Nature of Spiritual Formation**

Western culture and contemporary spirituality have attempted to make spirituality a private affair, involving only the individual and whichever god the individual chooses. While the work of spiritual formation does address an individual person, the work of

Christian spiritual formation is done within and for the benefit of the collective body of Christ. Timothy Brock writes, “God does not bring us into fellowship with him and make us a part of his people to function in isolation” (qtd. in Pettit 103). Human beings were created for connection, and spiritual formation is a connected enterprise. An individual does benefit personally from being properly formed spiritually, but the biblical record shows that God intends for the community to benefit as well. Lawrence Crabb provides a powerful image for the work of spiritual formation in community: “The calling of community is to lure people off the island onto the mainland where connection is possible and to provide it” (38). Corporate or community spiritual formation must work against the individualism present in today’s culture to create a gospel-focused community of faith.

The New Testament record speaks clearly about the connectional nature of spiritual formation. As seen in the New Testament, spiritual formation has four components: agent in the form of the Holy Spirit, a dynamic of growth as one identifies with his or her community, the goal of holiness within the larger context of mission, and a requirement of an open heart intent on growing in maturity (Pettit 104). While regaining the personal holiness that is significantly lacking in modern culture would be a tremendous improvement, God does not intend for his people to grow in maturity as an inward-facing process. Proper spiritual formation turns both individuals and groups outward in connection and mission.

The Holy Spirit is the working agent in the process of spiritual formation (Pettit 106). Scripture compares the Spirit to the wind, and as John asserts, “The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where

it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit” (John 3:8). As unpredictable as the wind, the work of the Holy Spirit cannot be reduced to a formula or a rote process. The dynamic of spiritual formation is a shared experience involving the intentional focus of the individual and the gift of grace through the Holy Spirit from God, all taking place in the natural flow of life. In the first chapter of Romans, Paul states that he is not ashamed of the gospel for it is “the power of God that brings salvation” (Rom. 1:16a). This *dunamis* is the enabling presence and working of the Holy Spirit. As a result, people who were not able to live in constant connection and response to God because of sin can be transformed into authentic wholeness and connection to God and others as a result of the presence and work of the Holy Spirit, the agent of change in spiritual formation. The work of the Holy Spirit, according to Titus 2, empowers persons to live a God-honoring life in the social context of healthy relationships and community.

The goal of the growth is the formation of individual holiness as a result of connection with God and an identification of oneself as a contributing member of a larger community. The language of Paul, especially in Ephesians, speaks of the community rather than language of the individual. Ephesians 2:14-17 speaks powerfully about the destroying of barriers between people groups and the creation of *one* new humanity of what was former two, resulting in *one body* reconciled through his sacrifice on the cross. In the setting of Ephesians, the two groups were the Jews and Gentiles. The passage speaks of peace with God but also peace and reconciliation with others in the still-being-formed community of God. Being “accepted in the beloved” is the embracing act of community through the gift of grace (see Eph. 1:6).

The imagery of community continues in verse 19 as Paul refers to his readers as “fellow citizens,” no longer foreigners and strangers. The imagery is of a community being created *together* out of people who were formerly separated. This dynamic is analogous to the image of humanity and God being separated by sin but recreated into new life in a restored relationship. The restoration is not just between humanity and God but also between individual persons and within individual persons. Authentic community is created as the human person is re-created. The language throughout chapter 2 is community language. Paul states that is a community is being given new life together, being raised together, and seated together with Christ (see Eph. 2:4-6). As persons grow in holiness individually, the community is also being formed and strengthened.

The community aspect of spiritual formation is echoed in Jesus’ prayer in John 17. Jesus prayed passionately for the protection of his followers and for them to be “brought to complete unity” (John 17:23). The wording suggests that work remains to be done to reach complete unity and that a force outside the persons involved is required to achieve the goal. Jesus has given the people the glory he received from God the Father, and he states that this glory is the motivating force in the development of unity (John 17:22). The overall prayer is an emphatic plea from Jesus for his followers to see God and believe in God so that they may be unified with each other. In Jesus’ prayer, unity implies community. Paul echoes this intent in Ephesians 2:15 to whom the new man he refers had already been identified as a new community.

Jesus’ words in the Lord’s Prayer also speak to the communal nature of an authentically holy life. Jesus instructed his followers to pray not for individual needs but for *our* daily bread, forgiveness of *our* sins, and for God to “lead *us* not into temptation



but to deliver *us* from the evil one” (emphasis mine; Matt. 6:13 NIV). Jesus calls Christians to pray for themselves as part of a community, not singularly as individuals.

The formation of wholeness in a person as he or she identifies with the community of God and is on the receiving end of forming grace by the Holy Spirit requires the presentation of an open and seeking heart. Willard says this formation is done within the dimension of the will as it reaches out and properly connects to God in the partnership that results in spiritual growth (Willard, *Spirit* 40). Brock uses the term *heart* rather than *will* but the intent is the same (113). Humanity must come fully and expectantly to God, presenting the very core of their person to God, withholding nothing. Marjorie J. Thompson defines spirituality as “the universal human capacity to receive, reflect and respond to the spirit of God” (7). In order to receive, reflect, and respond to God authentically, persons must make the intentional decision to open their lives to him. Thompson echoes Willard and Scazzero: “The Spirit insists on transforming us at every level: personal, social, economic and political. God is Lord of our *whole* life” (emphasis mine; 16). For God to be Lord of a person’s whole life, he or she must give God access to the entirety of his or her existence. The individual holds the responsibility to meet God, authentically opening his or her life fully to the change God desires.

According to Paul in Galatians 5:5, Christians have received the Spirit as a gift towards the hope of righteousness. The goal of spiritual formation is personal righteousness, but for the larger purpose of mission. Even as the gifts of the Spirit become a reality in the life of an individual, a person can not work out the practice of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control in isolation from others (Gal. 5:22-23). These gifts cannot be practiced in an isolated life,

out of touch with the community of God and beyond. This truth is further clarified by Paul in Galatians 6:10: “So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially those who are of the household of the faith.” Authentic, loving community is the goal of proper spiritual formation in the individual follower of Christ.

Jim Wilhoit presents a powerful approach to corporate spiritual formation. Wilhoit presents four dimensions of community formation: receiving, remembering, responding, and relating. These are not programs or practices as much as they are expressions or perspectives that a community committed to authentic formation hold as central in their approach to life and ministry (76). Wilhoit expands each of these four dimensions by adding a corollary condition or action:

- Receiving requires brokenness,
- Remembering is done through worship,
- Responding is done through inclusion, and
- Relating is done through hospitality (76).

These four dimensions aid in seeing the process of corporate spiritual formation as less than a set of programs and more of a mind-set. The inclusion of four conditions or actions places these dimensions within reach of life and ministry rather than existing only as academic rhetoric. Christians need frequent reminders that their intentional actions are needed in partnership with God in order for proper spiritual formation to occur. Wilhoit’s article places this required intentionality within reach.

### **The Historical Context of Methodism**

Wesley’s formative experiences with his mother, Susanna, provided him with basic biblical literacy, which was later expanded both formally at Oxford and informally

through his experiences with the Holy Club. He further sharpened his faith as a result of exposure to the Moravians as they sailed towards Georgia in 1735-36 and later in England through his friendship with Peter Bohler. The sum of Wesley's life thus far provided the backdrop for his experience at Aldersgate. Herbert McGonigle properly gives credit to the Moravian influence regarding Aldersgate: "John Wesley's spiritual experience at Aldersgate was almost what might be expected from a sincere seeker whose hopes and expectations were nurtured by Moravian teaching, persuasion and example" (McConigle 10). Although his relationship with Moravian teaching was strained over time, his experience with Peter Bohler and Count Zinzendorf and his successes working with George Whitfield and others were formative in his firm commitment following Aldersgate to "spread scriptural holiness throughout the land" (Henderson 18). No longer unsure of his salvation, Wesley's priority in ministry was for "the making of a new life," marked by a new relation with fellow human beings that followed when one was intent on "doing no harm, doing good, attending to the ordinances" (Norwood 51).

Throughout his work in England and stateside, Wesley was not attempting to create a new denomination but to revive the Church of England. As he enjoyed success in preaching outdoors in England, Wesley differed from George Whitfield in that he believed he had to organize the people who were converted under his ministry in order to provide for spiritual growth and maturity. As early as his ministry in Georgia in 1736-37, Wesley organized people into groups to facilitate spiritual growth and maturity (Henderson 45). He felt so strongly that people should receive guidance in their spiritual growth beyond conversion that he eventually encouraged his preachers not to awaken

faith in people unless they had the resources and time to care for them in the church structure he had established (Payne 53).

When John and Charles Wesley arrived in Georgia in February 1736, other denominations were already making inroads in what was then still a British colony. Congregationalists, Anglicans, Baptists, Dutch and German Reformed, Lutherans, and Quakers, along with many other smaller groups, were already working to establish churches and win converts (Norwood 61). In a few short decades, Methodism had far outrun them all. Methodism was the largest and fastest growing denomination in the states, outpacing population growth more than 30 times over (Payne 1).

The success of the movement may have been somewhat surprising to at least one of the leaders of Methodism. In 1791, Bishop Thomas Coke wrote in a letter to Bishop William White of the Protestant Episcopal Church in America: "If we number the Methodists as most people number the members of their church, viz. by the families which constantly attend the divine ordinances in the places of worship, they will make a body larger than you could possibly conceive." (qtd. in Payne 104) As of the date of his letter, 750,000 of the nation's nearly 3.9 million people were Methodist (4). Nearly one in five people at that point in history were Methodist. Apparently, Coke had not anticipated such explosive growth.

The growth of Methodism was phenomenal. Six years before the Declaration of Independence was signed, church records indicated a total of 361 Methodists in the colonies. A decade later, that number had grown to 8,264, a growth rate of 2,267 percent. From 1780 through 1840, the number of Methodists grew by an average of 139.7 percent per decade. Numerical growth of the church exceeded population growth in all but one

decade, 1790-1800 (Payne 2). While growth at this high rate presented many challenges, increasing the number of clergy was not a serious limiting factor. In 1785, conference records reported “nearly 1,000 traveling preachers” (4). By the first centennial of the church, the denomination had more than 15,000 clergy—6,821 itinerant and 8,205 local preachers (104). Following the arrival of Richard Boardman and Joseph Pilmore, the first two clergy sent here by Wesley in 1769, Methodism experienced unparalleled growth in both laity and clergy alike until growth slowed in the years prior to the Civil War (70).

Methodism succeeded on a scale far grander than the many other denominations working to establish a presence during the same period of time. Michael D. Henderson is one of many who credit Wesley’s genius of structure and accountability as the experiential foundation for the explosive growth (13). In “The Character of a Methodist,” a tract published in 1742, Wesley begins, “The distinguishing marks of a Methodist are not his opinions of any sort,” and goes on to describe the marks that accurately depict a Methodist. Wesley’s answer gives insight into the core tenets of his practice of faith:

A Methodist is one who has the love of God shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Ghost given unto him, who loves the Lord his God with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his mind, and crying out with all his strength. God is the joy of his heart, and the desire of his soul; which is constantly crying out, “Whom have I in heaven but thee? And there is none upon this earth that I desire beside thee My God and my all! Thou are the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever!”

Wesley believed that the practice of faith was all-inclusive of life, involving both mind and body. The most important factor in the life of a Methodist is the desire to serve God out of a deeply felt desire to respond to the love of God. Wesley believed that a life lived in such a way would result in authentic happiness, a human dynamic that is only possible

in relationship with God. As a result, Wesley spent his life working to create the structures that would enable people to experience and embrace this God-given happiness.

### **The Structure of Early Methodism**

As the movement found success, Wesley worked to establish the structures that he believed would enable the people who considered themselves Methodist to succeed in living the Christian life as Wesley understood that life to be. He recruited lay preachers and charged them with putting his structures in place in the geographic areas to which they were assigned. These structures were responsible for much of the success the Methodist movement experienced (Payne 13).

**Development of society, class, and band.** Wesley drew from the Anglican religious societies of his time, the Moravian groups he had experienced, as well as his own formative experiences in The Holy Club at Oxford as models for his church structure (Yrigoyen 17). The people who were converted to faith as a result of his preaching were invited to grow in spiritual maturity by participation in Wesley's three-tiered structure—the society, the class, and the band. These groups were the result of Wesley's belief that intentionality was required in order to mature as a Christian.

The largest group Wesley termed a society. Roughly analogous to a modern concept of a congregation, Wesley provided a clear definition of a society:

No other than a company of men having the form and seeking the power of godliness, united in order to pray together, to receive the word of exhortation, and to watch over one another in love, that they may help each other to work out their own salvation. (Henderson 97)

Admission into a society required “a desire to flee the wrath to come, to be saved from their sin” (97). The society had the lowest bar to admission of the three groups.

The second level Wesley created was the class, a coed group of up to twelve with a higher bar of accountability than that required for membership in a society. For Wesley, the class operated on several key principles of faith as he understood it from the New Testament: “personal growth within the context of intimate fellowship, accountability for spiritual stewardship, bearing one another’s burdens, and speaking the truth in love” (14). To be a member of a class, one had to earn a class ticket by virtue of participation and adherence to the rules of the society. Those who failed to live according to the established standards for the class were removed from class membership until such a time as they proved themselves worthy of readmittance via another class ticket (Payne 53). Classes often stayed together for years, cultivating the most intimate of friendships and shared accountability (Henderson 102). In the society, Scripture and the doctrine of the church were proclaimed. In the class meeting, the members came to understand the meaning of a holy life and began working together towards that goal.

While Wesley believed that spiritual growth was the norm for every believer, he created a third level for those who voluntarily sought a deeper faith. He called the third and most challenging in terms of requirements and accountability—the band. This level was reserved for those who made the personal decision to seek a deeper faith experience.

The idea of the band, a voluntary group of only three to five individuals of the same gender, came from Wesley’s experience with the Moravians at Herrnhut and his formative years in the Holy Club at Oxford (Henderson 114). The band operated at a very high level of personal accountability characterized by “ruthless honesty and frank openness by which members sought to improve their attitudes, emotions, feelings, intentions and affections” (114). Of the three levels of ministry, Wesley’s favorite was

the band. At this small cell level, the bands facilitated “the cultivation of holiness, inner purity and the purging of wrong attitudes” (115). Clearly Wesley believed that a high level of personal holiness was achievable for every Methodist and he set about replicating these structures throughout the footprint of the Methodist movement.

**Methodism emphasized community.** Wesley’s combination of preaching to conversion followed by rigorous participation and accountability in society, class, and band resulted in consistent, intense experiences of community. The experiential power of the Methodist movement was described by Francis Asbury following a society meeting in 1779: “The operations of the Holy Spirit were very powerful in the congregation, so that there was a general melting” (qtd. in Richey 3). Asbury’s term *melting* is descriptive of a powerful coming together, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, toward Wesley’s directive of personal and social holiness. Wesley would approve of the words written by Bett nearly 150 years after his death: “The stress has always been, in Methodist theology, upon the redeeming love of God in Christ, and the work of the Holy Spirit; upon repentance, and faith, and conversion, and fellowship, and holiness” (93). Wesley’s focus on personal holiness in the context of social holiness provided the foundation for the growth of Methodism through its first century and beyond.

### **From Growth to Decline**

In the first 100 years of existence, the Methodist movement experienced growth unmatched in American church experience. The growth was not limited to the United States. By 1909, Methodism was the largest Protestant denomination in the United States and counted more than 35 million members worldwide. From 1790 onward, Methodism in the United States grew by an average of 37 percent per decade until the 1990s when



the trend reversed itself with a 10.8 percent decline. While this statistic in and of itself may suggest a robust increase for nearly two hundred years, the rate of growth slowed considerably beginning shortly after the start of the twentieth century (General Council). The decline has been well documented.

**Contemporary calls for change.** In 1965, one in fifteen people in the United States was a United Methodist. (Schaller 28). In less than twenty years, the denomination had declined so much that a bishop declared the denomination nearly dead (Wilkie 9). A year later, Bishop William H. Willimon and Robert Leroy Wilson, former director of the J. M. Ormond Center for Research, Planning and Development at Duke University, said that managers who did little more than maintain the institution dominated the United Methodist Church (59). In 2004, Lyle E. Schaller said metaphorically that the ice cube was melting, in reference to the downward trend in membership, attendance, professions of faith, and baptisms in the United Methodist Church in the United States since its inception. In 2011, Lovett H. Weems said the United Methodist Church would not survive the coming “death tsunami” that would begin in 2018 unless the financial baseline of the church is radically realigned. “Depending on fewer people for more money ... is unsustainable.” (“UMC Realities” 14). The denomination’s own *2012 State of the Church Report* indicated a decrease of 721,990 professing members from 2000-2010 (General Conference 4). The report went on to say that only 15 percent of the United Methodist Churches in the United States were considered vital based on attendance, growth and engagement (4). According to data from the *2012 State of the Church Report* and from the United States Census Bureau, one in forty-one people in the

United States was a Methodist at the end of 2013 (4) (calculation my own using population data from [www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov)).

Willimon and Wilson claim that the primary concern of United Methodist leadership is “ensuring that the various parts are correctly organized and staffed by the appropriate number of designated categories of persons” (59). Their statement is an apt description of the current state of many Methodist congregations. Schaller claims that the current United Methodist system is designed to produce fewer congregations and fewer members (47). The current reality is summed up accurately by the writers of *Call to Action Report* established by the 2010 Call to Action:

Business as usual is unsustainable. Dramatically different and new behaviors, not incremental changes, are required. We have not yet seen the degree of shared sense of urgency or commitment to systemic adaptations with the redirection of leadership expectations and sufficient resources that our situation requires. (8)

Willimon, Wilson, Schaller, Weems, and others are clear in that the design of the denominational structure is part of the problem, along with a failure to remain committed to Wesleyan practices. Dick asserts that the decline is occurring because mainline churches “abandoned the fundamental tenets of faith, theology and polity that gave them their identity in the first place” (7). Denominational vision, structure and practice must all be considered for change if Methodism is to return to vitality.

**Efforts towards revitalization.** The authors whose descriptions of the decline have been cited here are among a much larger group of theologians, academicians, and laypeople who have each offered their plans for reversing the decline, yet the fall continues in terms of membership, attendance, baptisms, and professions of faith. The United Methodist General Council on Finance and Administration published annual

conference statistics showing only four annual conferences with increases in membership and only five with increases in attendance from 2007-2010. For the United Methodist Church in the United States as a whole, membership fell 1.42 percent and attendance fell 2.28 percent from 2007-2010. Perhaps more telling than these statistics is the church attendance category that has grown the most since 1990; more people than ever indicate that they attend “never” (Weems “No Shows” 11).

Many United Methodist churches have attempted to copy the ministry practices of the so-called megachurches in an effort to experience growth. Dick describes these churches attempts at growth:

Some churches have moved towards a more consumeristic, non-demanding, highly entertainment-oriented style of church – jumping on the playing field created by the evangelical/independent “big boys” like Willow Creek and Saddleback. A few United Methodist churches have experienced similar growth, adding to the mistaken belief that “big is better, success means growth.” (7)

The megachurch model is not replicable in most settings, nor are the measures of success common in megachurch discussions necessarily valid.

Dick suggests that the popular measures for success need to be replaced with more valid methods of determining the degree of success of a local church: “Where the formation of faith is concerned and spiritual development and Christian community is the point, qualitative (rather than quantitative) measures are most important. Bigger says nothing about faithful, and active says nothing about effective” (8). For Dick, the answer is to measure sustainability (10).

The denomination needs to return to Wesley’s “The Character of a Methodist” to find the path to a brighter future. Wesley unpacks what the meaning of being a Methodist by listing and explaining the “distinguishing marks of a Methodist.” In doing so, Wesley

develops a clear picture of a healthy, individual, biblical self-understanding. Dependence on Scripture, the love of God in one's heart, a life of joy and happiness, a mature understanding of Christ's sacrifice and the meaning of being justified, the importance of praying without ceasing, being pure of heart, and, finally, a total submission to the will of God and the evidence of the fruits that result—these are the marks of a Methodist. A congregation of individuals who make the intentional decision to embrace these marks would experience revival.

In this tract, Wesley himself predicted dire consequences if Methodism ever has only the form of religion without the power. The statistics given here suggest that the United Methodist Church is exactly that in many of its churches—the form of religion without the power. If the individual Christians who make up a congregation could be encouraged to take on the mantle of Methodism as so clearly and passionately described by Wesley in 1742, a revival could take place in a local church.

**Perspectives from Malcom Gladwell.** In his book, Malcom Gladwell expounds on The Broken Window Theory, first proposed by criminologists James Q. Wilson and George Kelling as part of their explanation of the dynamics of epidemics (141). This theory may help us understand why the reversal of the downward trend in the denomination has failed to respond to revitalization efforts in any great degree. The Broken Window Theory suggests that context is a tremendous motivator either for change or for maintenance of the status quo. For example, a neighborhood with broken windows, graffiti and dirty streets create a physical context that works against efforts to reduce crime and make the neighborhood safer. Efforts to reduce crime without addressing the physical context of the neighborhood in question are typically

unsuccessful. Gladwell uses New York City's hiring of Kelling to clean up the city's horrendous subway system in the mid 1980s as an example. Rather than hire more police officers to work the subways, Kelling cleaned up the subway environment, and crime rates took a nosedive. Our churches may not have broken windows and graffiti, but The Broken Window Theory is applicable regardless.

Gladwell places Wilson and Kelling's theory into a framework he calls "The Power of Context" (150). Gladwell proposes that a criminal is often driven by a complex set of reasons:

[A criminal is] far from someone who acts for fundamental, intrinsic reasons and who lives in his own world ... [but] is actually someone who is acutely sensitive to his environment, who is alert to all kinds of cues, and who is prompted to commit crimes based on his perception of the world around him. (149)

Gladwell suggests that the power of context is a significant driver of behavior, meaning the criminal may be more driven by external forces than internal decision making.

Methodist churches are not subways and Methodist pastors and laypeople are not criminals, but the denomination can learn something from Gladwell's work.

The Methodist denominational system has been in decline for the entire ministry careers of most of the current clergy current under appointment. As a result, decline has become the accepted norm, the power of context for clergy in Methodism. Coupled with the celebration of slow decline or at the very least maintenance of the current statistics as success, perhaps the church has its own neighborhood of spiritual broken windows, graffiti and dirty streets. I have attended many annual conference gatherings in which a small percentage decline in church attendance or membership during the previous year is lauded as success, thereby giving clergy and laity alike the impression that the church is

alive and well. The message delivered over time is that a slow decline is about the best churches can hope to achieve. This message has been so well received that annual conferences and local churches continue to celebrate maintenance ministry as success.

While Mineral Springs does have a few years of growth within recent memory, the trend over time has been downward in attendance, giving and meaningful ministry beyond the church. Perhaps recent local history has provided our own power of context and has added to the tendency to assess inaccurately our current condition. In total, the lay members of the leadership team lacked deep experience with churches other than Mineral Springs, so the *Congregational Vitality Assessment* (Dick 127) was a necessary step in this project to provide an unbiased snapshot of the health of the church, absent any influence from Mineral Springs own broken windows, graffiti or dirty streets. The Assessment was conducted to assist the participants in gaining a clear view of the need for change at Mineral Springs.

### **The Leadership Structure of a United Methodist Church**

This project was conducted with the lay members of the administrative council. The members of the council are nominated by the church's committee on nominations and leadership development and affirmed as leaders by action of the annual charge conference. As the representative leaders of the local church, these lay leaders together with paid staff and appointed clergy are charged to "envision, plan, implement and annually evaluate the mission and ministry of the church" (*Book of Discipline* 178). The polity of the United Methodist Church is not one member, one vote as in congregational churches but is representational. At Mineral Springs United Methodist Church, the current twenty members of the 2015 administrative council have the authority and

responsibility to lead the congregation by establishing the goals for all ministry activities and leading the whole of the church in the accomplishing of those goals.

The *Book of Discipline* gives a great deal of flexibility to the administrative council in carrying out their ministry responsibilities. Administrative committees are required for the work of the trustees, finance, and staff-parish relations, but the council has freedom to organize the church in whatever way best meets the needs of the church and community in carrying out the ministry work of nurture, outreach, and mission. *The Book of Discipline* provides the following goal: “a program of nurture, outreach, witness and resources” (178). The administrative council has the responsibility of evaluating their local context and establishing the structure best suited to accomplish the ministry goals needed in the church and community.

### **The Small Group Study**

The second part of this project’s two-part intervention was a four-week small group experience in spiritual formation. The lay members of the Mineral Springs United Methodist Church Administrative Council met for four weekly sessions from Sunday, 8 February through Sunday, 1 March 2015. Makeup sessions were offered on the following Tuesday for the same time period. Council members could attend either the Sunday or Tuesday sessions, provided they attended all four in total. The content of these four sessions came together from the research done for this project (see Appendix E).

### **Research Design**

The project utilized an explanatory, mixed-methods design with both qualitative and quantitative questions. Quantitative questions were used in the initial survey to gather demographic data about the participants. Likert-scale and open-ended questions were

used in both the initial and final surveys to gather qualitative data regarding the beliefs and attitudes of the members of the leadership team so that changes could be identified. Open-ended questions were included in the final survey in order to identify which aspects of the interventions yielded the noted changes. The explanatory aspect of the design allowed me to use qualitative data collection and analysis to develop the quantitative findings further, as John W. Creswell indicates is appropriate for explanatory studies (15379-80).

Mixed-methods research design utilizes both quantitative and qualitative elements. Quantitative research uses narrowly defined questions to obtain quantifiable data from numerous participants, analyzes the data statistically, and conducts the overall project in an objective manner (Creswell 1146-47). Qualitative research collects verbal data by asking open-ended questions and identifies themes by analyzing the response. (1270). The research design mixes both quantitative and qualitative methods in order to produce better results than would be possible using either method exclusively (14794). I chose the explanatory, mixed-methods design in order to answer the research questions adequately.

### **Summary**

This project evaluated the impact on beliefs and attitudes of the Mineral Springs United Methodist Church leadership team regarding their own spiritual lives and the challenges of leading change. The church was in the initial stages of revitalization following more than a decade of stagnancy in terms of membership, attendance, and financial giving. While the whole church body is involved in revitalization, United Methodist polity invests the responsibility of leadership in a representative few on behalf



of the many. Therefore, this project is focused solely on the volunteer members of the leadership team.

The literature review covered the need for and experiences of spiritual formation, including the corporate nature of God's desires for spiritual maturation. The review also addressed the context of the project within the history and contemporary state of the United Methodist connection. Within the dynamics of a local church, the responsibility for leading resides with the collective members of the leadership team. Spiritual maturity, or the lack thereof, affects the leaders' willingness and ability to persevere in the face of resistance to change.

The beliefs and attitudes of lay leadership towards their own spiritual lives were evaluated before and after a four-week spiritual formation experience and an assessment of the church's current state in terms of growth and stability. In order to assess the changes resulting from the project interventions adequately, an explanatory, mixed-methods design was implemented. Data analysis was done according to standard practices for an explanatory, mixed-method research project.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **Problem and Purpose**

Like many other United Methodist churches, Mineral Springs has been relatively stagnant for more than a decade in terms of membership, attendance and financial giving. This project was undertaken in order to evaluate the impact of a four-week spiritual development experience and an assessment of church vitality on the beliefs and attitudes of lay members of Mineral Springs United Methodist Church's leadership team towards their own spiritual lives and the challenges of leadership.

The purpose of this research project was to evaluate the changes in beliefs and attitudes of the members of the Mineral Springs United Methodist Church leadership team towards their own spiritual lives and challenges of leading change as a result of an assessment of church vitality and an four-week experience in spiritual formation.

#### **Research Questions**

The three research questions utilized in this project were designed to evaluate the changes in lay members of the leadership team as a result of a spiritual development experience and the results of a comprehensive assessment of church vitality. The first research question provided a baseline by measuring beliefs and attitudes of the leaders regarding their own spiritual lives and the challenges of leading change in the local church. The second research question gathered the same data following the spiritual formation experience and church assessment in order to determine the changes resulting from the experience. The third research question sought to identify the particular aspects

of the experience that contributed to the changes seen in the results of questions one and two.

### **Research Question #1**

Prior to the *Congregational Vitality Assessment* (Dick 127) and the spiritual formation experience, what were the beliefs and attitudes of the Mineral Springs United Methodist Church leaders regarding their own spiritual lives and the challenges of leading change? To answer this question, questions 1-23 of the initial survey collected data to establish a baseline related to the beliefs and attitudes of the lay leadership team members. Questions 27-36 collected demographic data. The initial survey was an anonymous online questionnaire that included both qualitative and quantitative elements and was completed prior to the *Congregational Vitality Assessment* and spiritual formation experience (Dick 127).

### **Research Question #2**

Following the *Congregational Vitality Assessment* and the spiritual formation experience, what were the beliefs and attitudes of the Mineral Springs United Methodist Church leaders regarding their own spiritual lives and the challenges of leading change? To answer this question, questions 1-23 of the final survey collected data to establish an end point related to the beliefs and attitudes of the lay leadership team members. By comparing the baseline and end point data, the change in beliefs and attitudes was identified and analyzed. The final survey was an anonymous online questionnaire that included both qualitative and quantitative elements and was completed after the *Congregational Vitality Assessment* and spiritual formation experience (Dick 127).

### Research Question #3

Which aspects of this experience contributed to the change in pre- to postintervention data? To answer this question, questions 24-29 of the final survey collected data to determine which aspects of the experience contributed to the identified changes. The final survey was an anonymous online questionnaire that included both qualitative and quantitative elements and was completed after the *Congregational Vitality Assessment* and spiritual formation experience (Dick 127).

### Population and Participants

This research project was conducted with members of the 2015 lay leadership team of Mineral Springs United Methodist Church. The members of the leadership team were nominated by the Mineral Springs Lay Leadership committee and officially elected at the 2015 Charge Conference on 28 October 2014. While all members of the Administrative Council were invited to attend, one member was unable to attend three of the four small group sessions. As a result, seventeen of the twenty members of the Administrative Council completed the project.

### Design of the Study

Mineral Springs United Methodist Church was in the beginning stages of an investment in revitalization as this research project began. This project sought to evaluate the impact on the members of the church leadership team and their willingness to lead change as a result of a two-part intervention—an assessment of congregational vitality and a four-week spiritual formation experience. Data analysis determined the changes as a result of the intervention and identified the specific aspects of the interventions that contributed to the identified changes.

The first of the project's five phases consisted of individual completion of the initial survey by members of the leadership team. The second stage consisted of an assessment of the current state of the church using Dick's *Congregational Vitality Assessment I* (Dick 127). Members of the leadership team completed the assessment individually and then met to review the overall results. The third phase consisted of a four-week spiritual formation experience by members of the leadership team. The team met once weekly for teaching from the book of Ephesians and discussions regarding spiritual formation and leadership. The fourth phase of the project consisted of individual completion of the final survey by members of the leadership team. The final survey gathered postintervention data on attitudes and beliefs towards spiritual formation and the challenges of leadership as well as data on which aspects of the intervention contributed to the changes from preintervention data gathered in the Initial Survey. The fifth and final phase was data analysis and the development of findings and recommendations.

### **Instrumentation**

The research utilized the standardized *Congregational Vitality Assessment* from Dick's book and two researcher-designed instruments—the initial survey and the final survey (Dick 127). Experts reviewed the initial and final surveys that were later delivered via e-mail by SogoSurvey and completed anonymously. SogoSurvey compiled the results and delivered them online.

Dick's *Congregational Vitality Assessment* was delivered in hard copy form. It asked twelve questions that gathered data related to church growth and an additional twelve questions related to church stability (Dick 127). Members of the leadership team

completed the assessment individually, and the results were compiled to yield a composite vitality score as determined by the leadership team's responses.

I designed the initial survey and had expert reviews done by the Research Reflection Team and Mike Voigts, the project mentor. The initial survey asked twenty-six questions to gather qualitative and quantitative data related to the beliefs and attitudes of the members of the leadership team prior to the project interventions and an additional eleven questions to gather demographic data. The initial survey was delivered electronically by SogoSurvey, completed individually online by members of the leadership team, and returned to me electronically by SogoSurvey.

I designed the final survey and had expert-reviews done by the Research Reflection Team and Dr. Mike Voigts. The final survey asked twenty-three questions to gather qualitative and quantitative data related to the beliefs and attitudes of the members of the leadership team following the project interventions and an additional six questions to determine which aspects of the interventions were most impactful. The final survey was delivered electronically by SogoSurvey, completed individually online by members of the leadership team, and returned to me electronically by SogoSurvey.

### **Expert Review**

The Research Reflection Team members provided expert review of the project's two researcher-designed instruments. Each reviewer received a hard copy of the instruments, a set of instructions for conducting the review, and a reply form for each instrument for recording recommendations and comments. Revisions were made in the instruments following the review.

## Variables

The independent variable was the four-week spiritual formation experience. I wrote the spiritual formation experience based on the book of Ephesians and content from my literature review to include a brief weekly teaching following by mutual discussion and sharing. The intent of the experience was to share lessons from Paul to the church in Ephesus as well as learning experiences in spiritual formation that would lend themselves more to personal pilgrimage rather than simply being an educational process (Pettit 180).

Dependent variables were the changes in the beliefs and attitudes of the lay leadership team members. The two project interventions were anticipated to cause a positive change in these dependent variables by exposing the participants to an in-depth assessment of the current state of Mineral Springs United Methodist Church followed by a spiritual development experience delivered in a small group format.

Intervening variables included poor attendance during the four-week spiritual formation experience and issues with the appointed pastor about any unrelated concerns that may have affected participants' survey answers. Proper data analysis helped provide a control for intervening variables. I encouraged the participants to attend all four small group sessions. The potential of unrelated personal issues with me as the participants' pastor was identified as a possible internal validity threat. This threat to validity was more difficult to control given the range of the possible issues in participants' relationships with me as their pastor. I identified and corrected for issues of this nature when possible as qualitative data was analyzed.

## Reliability and Validity

The reliability of project data and the validity of project findings were achieved to the highest degree possible within the scope and context of this project. I established context and face validity of the data analysis. As a result of the steps taken in this regard, the findings of this project are both reliable and valid within the context of this research.

In order to achieve an acceptable degree of reliability, my Research Reflection Team and my project mentor conducted expert reviews of the initial and final surveys. The *Congregational Vitality Assessment* was designed by Dick and used in the format as published (127 see Appendix D). The initial and final surveys were administered in exactly the same manner to all eighteen participants. Each received an e-mail with a link to the online surveys using SogoSurvey. Results were compiled and returned to me via SogoSurvey, minimizing the potential of data entry errors in scoring and entering the results of hard-copy questionnaires.

Reliability was also enhanced by a 94.44 percent response rate for the initial survey, final survey, *Congregational Vitality Assessment*, and the four small group sessions (Dick 127). One participant took the initial survey but due to illness was unable to attend but one of the small group sessions. In total, seventeen of the eighteen potential participants completed all phases of the project.

I took steps to ensure that what I intended to measure was actually measured. The expert reviews of the researcher-designed instruments established internal validity of both qualitative and quantitative items and ensured the alignment with the purpose statement, research questions, methodology and data analysis. The final survey included qualitative



items that identified what aspects of the project interventions led to the identified changes pre- and postdata. Context and face validity were established effectively.

### **Data Collection**

The reporting function of SogoSurvey was used to collect all project data. SogoSurvey ensured participant anonymity and provided the reporting capabilities needed to answer the research questions.

### **Phase One**

Members of the leadership team received a letter of invitation outlining the scope of the research project and the reasons why their participation was valuable for Mineral Springs and for other churches in the future. The informed consent letter was included in this invitation (see Appendix A). The letter contained an invitation to an initial meeting the following week. At this initial meeting, I reviewed the project scope, answered questions, shared the dates for the four spiritual formation sessions, and collected signed informed consent letters. With no more open questions, I reminded them of our second meeting date and adjourned the meeting.

I then used SogoSurvey to e-mail the initial survey and asked for completion within five days. I received compiled results from SogoSurvey within the five-day window. Data analysis was done in Phase Five.

### **Phase Two**

Phase two began with the distribution of the hard copy *Church Vitality Assessment* along with a self-addressed, stamped envelope (Dick 127). All participants returned their completed assessments within the five-day window as requested. I compiled the responses and created a church vitality snapshot (see Appendix F).

Individual responses were then destroyed. I then e-mailed the participants, thanking them for returning the assessment and reminding them of our next meeting date.

The final step in Phase Two was the meeting to review the church vitality snapshot. I handed out copies of the snapshot along with supporting information from Dick's *Vital Signs* that explained what the meaning of the results. Following discussion, I adjourned the meeting.

### **Phase Three**

Beginning a week after the review meeting, the participants began a four-week spiritual formation small group experience (see Appendix E). To ensure good attendance, we met on Sundays and offered a weekly make-up session on Tuesday nights. Both meetings took place in the church's education building. The room was set up with chairs around a table to facilitate discussion. Refreshments were available for each session. Every week, I led a short teaching from Paul's lessons in the book of Ephesians related to spiritual maturity and leadership with supporting information from my readings on spiritual formation, followed by discussion. I adjourned each meeting with prayer and a reminder of the following week's session.

### **Phase Four**

Following the sixth and final small group meeting, I used SogoSurvey to e-mail the final survey and asked for completion within five days. I received compiled results from SogoSurvey within the five-day window. Data analysis was done in Phase Five.

### **Phase Five**

The final phase of the project consisted of analysis of the data produced by the initial and final surveys. SogoSurvey automatically compiled and returned participants'

responses electronically, so data entry was kept at a minimum. Following data analysis, all hard-copy materials were destroyed. SogoSurvey anonymized the source of returned data, meaning no data existed that connected participant to reply. As a result, no data had to be destroyed following analysis.

### **Data Analysis**

The project included both quantitative and qualitative data. I used Likert-scale and open-ended questions to gather the range of data needed to answer the research questions adequately. I analyzed the data according to type and the format needed to answer the applicable research question.

Using data from the initial survey, I developed a demographic description of the population utilizing quantitative data from questions 33-43. I used responses to the initial survey to develop a qualitative preintervention data set. I compiled full-text replies to questions 3, 7, and 26 and used content analysis to identify major themes, which I then coded and categorized. I used the resulting information to develop findings relevant to the research questions being addressed.

I developed a postintervention data set from answers to the final survey using the same procedure as I did for the preintervention data set, so that the two could be compared. I followed the same procedure to analyze quantitative data from questions 3 and 25. I developed findings to answer research question 3 by compiling full-text replies to question 29, using content analysis to identify major themes that were then coded and categorized. I used the resulting information to develop findings relevant to research question 3.

## **Ethical Procedures**

I successfully completed all seminary requirements for training beyond the dissertation. In addition, I applied for and received approval for my research from the Asbury Theological Seminary Institutional Review Board. My Research Review Team approved the scope and content of the project. Finally, my mentor, second reader, and Beeson Program representative approved the project during the required proposal hearing. All of these steps were taken prior to the beginning of the project.

The participants in the project, specifically the volunteer members of the Mineral Springs United Methodist Church Administrative Council, received and signed informed consent letters prior to the start of research (see Appendix A). The informed consent letter described the scope of the project and outlined the efforts taken to ensure confidentiality during and after the research. All data collection was done anonymously using SogoSurvey for delivery of the instruments and collection of the data. Participant anonymity was maintained throughout data analysis. Original copies of all instruments and notes were destroyed following the completion of data analysis.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **FINDINGS**

#### **Problem and Purpose**

After decades of growth and expansion that began in the 1780s, Methodism transitioned from growth to decline in 1980. In the following decade, membership fell 10.8 percent. From 1950 until 2010, the denomination's membership fell by an average of 8.05 percent per decade ("United Methodist Membership Statistics"). That rate of membership decline translated into losing 721,990 members from 2000 until 2010 (General Conference). The decrease has not been stopped in spite of efforts at revitalization at the general conference, annual conference, and local church levels.

Flowers and Vanhoy, among others, point to church leaders as significant contributors to this complex issue (xvii). Many scholars, including Schaller, Donald G. Bloesc and Robin Maas and Gabriel O'Donnel, have written about the shallow faith present in the rank and file membership of so many local churches, clergy included (Maas and O'Donnel 12). Dick's research showed that less than 10 percent of local United Methodist churches could be described as vital based on research conducted in 2008-09 (11). As a result, local churches struggle to be successful in terms of life and ministry.

Mineral Springs United Methodist Church was in the beginning stages of an investment in revitalization as this research project began. Attendance at Mineral Springs peaked in the early 1990s but has trended downward since. Giving typically falls short of the annual budget, and many who attend do not participate in any activities beyond Sunday worship.

The purpose of this research project was to evaluate the changes in beliefs and attitudes of the members of the Mineral Springs United Methodist Church leadership team towards their own spiritual lives and the challenges of leading change as a result of an assessment of church vitality and a four-week experience in spiritual formation.

### **Participants**

The eighteen lay members of the 2015 Mineral Springs United Methodist Church were the participants in this research project. These laypeople became voting members of the Administrative Council according to the process required by the *Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church*. Persons were nominated to fill council vacancies by the church's Committee on Lay Leadership and were approved to serve in leadership roles at the church's annual Charge Conference on 28 October 2014. All were members of Mineral Springs United Methodist Church. All indicated that they were Christians, as well. Only three of the participants indicated that they did not participate in an active ministry beyond serving on the Administrative Council.

The lay members of the Administrative Council were invited to participate in this research project during the regular monthly meeting of the Council on 18 January 2015. The requirements for participating were shared and discussed. One member of the council declined to participate due to extensive work-related travel, but all remaining members made the commitment to participate. Each participating member signed and returned a informed consent letter prior to the beginning of the project (see Appendix A).

Questions 25-34 of the initial survey collected demographic information. The 100 percent response rate provided a complete demographic breakdown of the study population. In addition to basic questions about age and gender, the participants indicated

how old they were when they became Christians and how many years they have served in leadership roles at Mineral Springs.

The initial survey included questions related to age and gender of the participants. The Administrative Council was 53 percent male and 47 female. Complete age and gender information is presented in Table 4.1.

**Table 4.1. Participant Demographics by Age and Gender**

Age	n	%	Male n	%	Female n	%
18-20	1	5.56	0	—	1	5.56
21-25	0	—	0	—	0	—
26-34	0	—	0	—	0	—
35-44	2	11.11	1	5.56	1	5.56
45-54	2	11.11	1	5.56	1	5.56
55-64	7	38.89	4	22.22	3	18.75
65 or Over	5	33.33	3	18.75	2	18.75

Participants were asked to indicate their age when they became Christians. Not surprisingly, twelve of the eighteen participants accepted Christ at eighteen years of age or less (See Table 4.2). This trend is right in line with Barna's finding that 64 percent of people who claim to be born-again Christians make their commitment to Christ before their eighteenth birthday (Barna, Group). Participants were also asked their gender, but gender differences did not appear play a significant role in the results of the research.

**Table 4.2. Participant Demographics by Age of Conversion**

Age at Conversion	n	%
Less than 18	12	66.67
19-24	0	—
25-34	3	16.67
35-44	1	5.56
45-54	1	5.56
55-64	0	—
65 or Over	0	—

Participants were asked to indicate how many years they had served in leadership roles at Mineral Springs United Methodist Church. The distribution of leadership terms indicates the trend towards the same individuals serving in leadership roles with few new individuals joining the ranks of leadership over time. As noted previously, Mineral Springs seems to display the so-called 80/20 rule, as Table 4.3 indicates. Nearly half of the Administrative Council has served in leadership positions for more than a decade. Only one member has been in a leadership position for less than a year. Clearly the trend is toward long tenures, with fewer new people serving in leadership roles.

**Table 4.3 Participant Demographics by Years in Church Leadership**

Term of Leadership	n	%
0-2	1	5.88
3-6	5	29.41
7-10	3	17.64
11 or more	8	64.70



## Research Question #1

Prior to the *Congregational Vitality Assessment* (Dick 127) and the spiritual formation experience, what were the beliefs and attitudes of Mineral Springs United Methodist Church leaders regarding their own spiritual lives and the challenges of leading change?

As a group, the participants in the study viewed themselves as Christians (100 percent yes) who are aware of God's presence on a daily basis. Seventeen of eighteen either *agree* or *strongly agree* that their sense of self is formed overwhelmingly by their relationship with God. Table 4.4 presents the detailed responses to these three basic questions.

**Table 4.4. Initial Basic Individual Self-Perspectives**

Question	Strongly Agree		Agree		Neutral		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
I am aware of God's presence on a daily basis.	12	70.58	4	23.53	1	5.88	0	—	0	—
My sense of self—who I am and how I live—is formed by my relationship with God.	6	35.29	10	58.82	1	5.88	0	—	0	—
Generally speaking, my public self and my private self are the same.	1	5.88	14	82.35	1	5.88	1	5.88	0	—

Participants provided no real surprises in their responses to questions regarding basic individual Christian self-perspectives, with the possible exception of the one *disagree* response to the third question in Table 4.4. The *neutral* responses are interesting, but unpacking the reasons behind them lies beyond the scope of this survey.

The overwhelming response to these questions regarding basic Christian self-perspectives fell in the *strongly agree* or *agree* range, as expected.

The next set of questions addressed participants' beliefs and attitudes towards Scripture and the role of God's guidance in their lives. The responses were overwhelmingly positive in addressing the Bible as God's Word and the role of Scripture in providing guidance for life. The division of *strongly agree* and *agree* responses switched places between the Scripture and guidance questions and the questions about seeking God's guidance first in decision-making. Interestingly, no one was *neutral* regarding God's Word or the role of Scripture in providing guidance, but three respondents chose *neutral* for each of the questions regarding seeking God's guidance first in decision-making. Even more interesting, two of the respondents were divided in their answers to the two questions regarding seeking God's guidance first in decision making. Participant 18 was *neutral* in seeking God's guidance first in his or her personal life but chose *agree* when making decisions as part of the Administrative Council. Participant 5 chose *agree* when making decisions in his or her personal life but was *neutral* in seeking God's guidance in making Administrative Council decisions (See Table 4.5).

**Table 4.5. Initial Perspectives Regarding Scripture and God's Guidance**

Question	Strongly Agree		Agree		Neutral		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
I believe the Bible is God's Word.	14	82.35	3	17.64	0	—	0	—	0	—
I believe the Bible provides instructions for life.	13	67.47	4	23.53	0	—	0	—	0	—
When making decisions that affect my personal life, I seek God's guidance first.	5	29.41	10	58.82	2	11.76	0	—	0	—
When making decisions as part of the Administrative Council, I seek God's guidance first.	5	29.41	9	52.94	3	17.64	0	—	0	—

The participants were asked to indicate in which of Foster's twelve spiritual disciplines they participated and the frequency of that participation. Responses indicated that prayer and worship tied as the most practiced disciplines (94.44 percent each) and simplicity was the least practiced (5.56 percent). The remainder of the responses are provided below in Table 4.6. The data came from the initial survey; participants had yet to receive any focused exposure to spiritual disciplines within the scope of this project. A lack of understanding about what these disciplines entail may be represented in the data (See Table 4.6).

**Table 4.6. Initial Participation in Spiritual Disciplines**

<b>Discipline</b>	<b>Q</b>	<b>%</b>
Prayer	16	94.11
Worship	17	100.00
Service	15	88.23
Study	9	52.94
Celebration	8	47.05
Meditation	7	41.17
Submission	6	35.29
Confession	6	35.29
Solitude	4	23.53
Guidance	3	17.64
Fasting	1	5.88
Simplicity	1	5.88

Participants reported daily or weekly participation in an average of 5.44 spiritual disciplines. Daily or weekly participation in more than five spiritual disciplines seems questionable given responses seen in other sections of the surveys.

Participants were asked to indicate the degree to which the spiritual disciplines they practiced affected their daily decisions and when asked to answer questions about life and faith. The results, shown in Table 4.7, were positive in terms of the impact of the individual's practice of spiritual disciplines.

**Table 4.7. Initial Impact of Spiritual Disciplines**

Question	Strongly Agree		Agree		Neutral		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
The decisions I make on a daily basis are affected by the spiritual disciplines I engage in.	7	41.17	9	52.94	1	5.88	0	—	0	—
The decisions I make on a daily basis are affected by the spiritual disciplines I engage in.	7	41.17	8	47.05	2	11.76	0	—	0	—

The participants were asked to indicate the degree to which they understood their role on the Administrative Council, the degree to which they found their role on the council to be personally challenging and whether or not they were well prepared for the work of the council. The fact that nearly two-thirds of the council found the activities involved in serving as a member of the Administrative Council personally challenging raises concern, the details of which are addressed by Question 8. Fourteen of the eighteen members either agreed or strongly agreed that significant changes lie in the church's future. Only two of the fourteen who anticipated significant changes did not anticipate experiencing personal challenges as a result, but six were neutral. The neutral responses may indicate an unwillingness to acknowledge that the participant held concerns when, in fact, they did. This data is presented in Table 4.8.

**Table 4.8. Initial Participants' Attitudes Regarding the Administrative Council**

Question	Strongly Agree		Agree		Neutral		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
I have a clear understanding of what is expected of me in my role on the Administrative Council.	3	17.64	12	70.58	2	11.76	0	—	0	—
I feel that I am well prepared for what is expected of me as a member of the Administrative Council.	1	5.88	12	70.58	3	17.64	1	5.88	0	—
I find the activities involved in being a member of the Administrative Council personally challenging.	4	23.53	8	47.05	5	29.41	0	—	0	—
My role on the Administrative Council will require leading through significant changes in the life of our church.	5	29.41	8	47.05	3	17.64	1	5.88	0	—

Participants were asked what aspects of their involvement on the Administrative Council contributed to them considering the experience to be personally challenging. Open text answers to question 3 ranged from “speaking in front of people” and “I don’t have a good working knowledge of how the church works yet” to “dealing with the conflicts” and “managing my reaction to the comments directed at me by members who have disagreed with the decisions made by the council.” Eight replies used the term *conflict* or described conflict in other words or phrases. The participants clearly struggled with the times when members of the council were in conflict, either within the council or with church members outside the council. Making the potential for conflict greater was the belief held by fourteen of the eighteen members that significant change was in the church’s future. Other comments indicate the challenges of individual perspective regarding the same events. One participant said, “The most challenging part of the

process is being able to be patient with the process and with people perceived to be dragging his or her feet through the processes.” Another participant described the opposite opinion by stating their personal challenges were caused by “when issues seem to be ‘rushed’ through without a thorough understanding.” Perhaps these two council members were describing each other. Regardless, these types of responses pointed out the difficulties created when a committee holds leadership authority in total rather than having authority invested in an individual, especially a committee in which not every member feels well prepared for their role (see Table 4.8).

Question 5 brought together the spiritual perspective and the participants’ roles on the Administrative Council (see Table 4.9). Participants were asked how much their own spiritual life has affected the way they fulfill their role on the Administrative Council. A median score of eight indicates for the first question indicates that the participants believe their spiritual lives has affected their work on the council in a very great degree. While the impact was not the *greatest amount possible*, the participants believe that their work on the council was clearly affected by their spiritual lives. The median score of 8.5 for the second question indicates that the participants are even more willing to face the difficulties of leading through change as a member of the council. This score is remarkable close to *totally willing*, demonstrating a very high degree of willingness to lead through difficulties.

**Table 4.9. Initial Spiritual Life, Administrative Council, and Willingness to Face Difficulties**

Question	Sum	Mean	Median	Mode	SD
At this point, how much has your spiritual life affected the way you fulfill your role on the Administrative Council, with 10 being “the greatest amount possible” and 0 being “none.”	137	7.61	8	8.00, 9.00	1.97
If you anticipate facing significant changes, how willing are you to face the resulting difficulties, with 10 being “totally willing” and 0 being “totally unwilling.”	149	8.28	8.5	10.00	1.81

Participants were asked in question 6 to identify what aspects of their spiritual lives affected the way they fulfilled their role on the Administrative Council. Two themes stood out in the responses—prayer and the role of values and beliefs. Six respondents listed prayer as the primary spiritual dimension of their lives that affected the way they fulfill their roles on the council. Two respondents referred to their own Christian values and beliefs as having an impact on their role on the council. Two other respondents made reference to the church being God’s family. “This is God’s church and God’s people need to dwell in it with the same mission” and “love of our church family” were similar in nature. The remaining six responses were random, ranging from “wanting to bring more people to God” to “I feel like council meetings make me less spiritual. I end up leaving angry many times due to ‘Committee-gate.’” The mention of only one of the spiritual disciplines listed in question 11 calls into question both the quantity and the frequency of spiritual disciplines being practiced by the participants, especially when viewed in light of the high median score of the first question in Table 4.9.



Questions 9, 21 and 22 address spiritual maturity, forgiveness, and financial sacrifice. The ability to forgive and the willingness to sacrifice financially are behaviors related to spiritual maturity (see Table 4.10). Four participants chose the neutral response regarding their own spiritual maturity, six chose the neutral response regarding sacrificial giving, and 11 chose the neutral response or worse when asked about forgiveness. The first of these three questions addressed the participants' maturity directly, then the remaining two questions dealt with maturity indirectly by inquiring about two behaviors that tend to occur with a greater degree of spiritual maturity. The second two questions in Table 4.10 point to a lesser degree of spiritual maturity than was indicated by the response to the first question.

**Table 4.10. Initial Spiritual Maturity, Sacrificial Giving, and Forgiveness**

Question	Strongly Agree		Agree		Neutral		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
I am a spiritually mature Christian.	5	29.41	8	47.05	4	23.53	0	—	0	—
I sacrifice financially to help others in my church and my community.	4	23.53	7	41.17	6	35.29	0	—	0	—
I can easily forgive others when their actions harm me.	0	—	6	35.29	8	47.05	3	17.64	0	—

The participants were asked to define spiritual maturity in question 23. Six respondents used the word *relationship* or used phrases that described relationships in speaking about maturity. Five participants referred to the knowledge of God, knowing God, or understanding God as evidence of spiritual maturity. Five others referred to the study of God's Word as a central theme of their maturity. Four participants mentioned

growth or growing, and three said that simply being aware of God resulted in spiritual maturity. Two participants' answers made no mention of God: "Having an open mind, considering all options" and "being able to learn, love and listen to your inner being." The vague answers from some participants to question 23 also call into question the degree to which the reported number of spiritual disciplines were being practiced daily.

### **Research Question #2**

Following the *Congregational Vitality Assessment* (Dick 127) and the spiritual formation experience, what were the beliefs and attitudes of Mineral Springs United Methodist Church leaders regarding their own spiritual lives and the challenges of leading change?

One of the participants in the initial survey was unable to complete three of the four sessions in the small group experience and the final survey due to travel and illness. Rather than remove that participant's data from the results of the initial survey and the *Congregational Vitality Assessment* (Dick 127), the data was left intact for all eighteen participants. The number of participants in the final survey was reduced to seventeen as a result of this individual's inability to participate. Notations have been made in answering Research Questions #2 and #3 when this difference was statistically significant.

The percentage of participants who viewed themselves as Christians remained as expected at 100 percent. Those who viewed their sense of self as being formed by their relationship with God moved in an interesting pattern. Three fewer chose *strongly agree*, three more chose *agree* and one moved from *neutral* to *disagree* indicating they had given further consideration to what is meant by the process of being formed by a relationship with God. The discussion of spiritual formation during the small group

experience most likely prodded this transition, moving some in a positive direction and others in a negative direction. Table 4.11 presents the final survey detailed responses to these three basic questions.

Changes in responses in this category were expected given the nature of self-reflection in the small group experience. Some participants considered themselves in a more negative light and some were moved to consider themselves more positively. Overall, three more participants chose *strongly agree* in responses to these questions in the final survey than in the initial survey. This positive move was offset by three fewer *strongly agree* responses. The one additional *disagree* was balanced by one less *disagree*. In summary, the group's basic self-perspectives made no significant move in either a positive or negative direction as a result of the project intervention.

**Table 4.11. Final Basic Individual Self-Perspectives**

Question	Strongly Agree		Agree		Neutral		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
I am aware of God's presence on a daily basis.	13	76.47	3	17.65	1	5.88	0	—	0	—
My sense of self—who I am and how I live—is formed by my relationship with God.	3	17.65	13	76.47	0	—	1	5.88	0	—
Generally speaking, my public self and my private self are the same.	3	17.65	13	76.47	0	—	1	5.88	0	—

The next set of questions addressed participants' beliefs and attitudes towards Scripture and the role of God's guidance in their lives. No changes were noted in the responses to the two questions regarding the Bible as God's Word and the Bible as

providing instructions for life. The two remaining questions regarding the role of God's guidance in personal decisions and in decisions related to the Administrative Council saw a move in the positive direction with an increase in the *strongly agree* responses fueled by decreases in both *agree* and *neutral* options. The two participants who were split between *neutral* and *agree* on the initial survey chose *agree* for both questions regarding decision making. This change should be viewed as a move towards consistency in seeking guidance from God in both personal and Administrative Council situations. The one remaining *neutral* selection for the questions regarding decision-making came from the same participant. This participant also chose *neutral* for both questions in the initial survey. Overall, the group presented a positive move regarding the seeking of guidance from God when making personal decisions and when making decisions as members of the Administrative Council (see Table 4.12).

**Table 4.12. Final Perspectives Regarding Scripture and God's Guidance**

Question	Strongly Agree		Agree		Neutral		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	N	%	n	%
I believe the Bible is God's Word.	14	82.35	3	17.65	0	—	0	—	0	—
I believe the Bible provides instructions for life.	13	76.47	4	23.53	0	—	0	—	0	—
When making decisions that affect my personal life, I seek God's guidance first.	7	41.18	9	52.94	1	5.88	0	—	0	—
When making decisions as part of the Administrative Council, I seek God's guidance first.	8	47.06	8	47.06	1	5.88	0	—	0	—

When asked to indicate which of Richard Foster's twelve spiritual disciplines they practiced, participants reported very little change from the responses to this question in the initial survey. Prayer and worship remained the highest-practiced disciplines. Solitude received the largest increase with nine rather than four selecting the discipline. Submission saw the largest decrease, dropping from six to two. Of the remaining disciplines, the ones that saw changes moved less than two selections either way. The number of spiritual disciplines the study group indicated they practiced daily, weekly, or monthly remained virtually unchanged, increasing from the initial survey average of 5.44 disciplines to the final survey average of 5.58 disciplines per participant (see Table 4.13).

**Table 4.13. Final Participation in Spiritual Disciplines**

Discipline	Q	%
Prayer	16	94.11
Worship	16	94.11
Service	15	88.23
Study	11	64.70
Celebration	6	35.29
Meditation	8	47.05
Submission	2	11.76
Confession	7	41.17
Solitude	9	52.94
Guidance	3	17.64
Fasting	1	5.88
Simplicity	1	5.88

Participants were asked to indicate the degree to which the spiritual disciplines they practiced affected their daily decisions and their answers to questions about life and

faith. The results indicated a move of two participants from *strongly agree* to *agree* regarding daily decision-making and move of two from *neutral* to *agree* regarding answering questions about life and faith. The changes from the initial survey to the final survey appear to be minor, with only two participants in each survey making a change in responses. In summary, the data presents a positive picture of the study group as they are impacted by the spiritual disciplines they choose to practice. Regarding personal decision making, 94.12 percent chose *agree* or *strongly agree* regarding the impact of the spiritual disciplines they practiced. When asked about the way they answer questions about life and faith, seventeen out of seventeen chose *strongly agree* or *agree* regarding the impact of their practice of spiritual disciplines. In summary, the study group reports being influenced to a tremendous degree by their practice of spiritual disciplines when making decisions and when asked to answer questions about life and faith (see Table 4.14).

**Table 4.14. Final Impact of Spiritual Disciplines**

Question	Strongly Agree		Agree		Neutral		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
The decisions I make on a daily basis are affected by the spiritual disciplines I engage in.	5	29.41	11	64.70	1	5.88	0	—	0	—
The way I answer questions about life and faith are informed by the spiritual disciplines I engage in.	7	41.17	10	58.82	0	—	0	—	0	—

The participants were asked to indicate the degree to which they understand their role on the Administrative Council, the degree to which they found their role on the council to be personally challenging and whether or not they were well prepared for the work of the council. Their responses are summarized in Table 4.15.

**Table 4.15. Final Attitudes Regarding the Administrative Council**

Question	Strongly Agree		Agree		Neutral		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
I have a clear understanding of what is expected of me in my role on the Administrative Council.	6	35.29	10	58.82	0	—	1	5.88	0	—
I feel that I am well prepared for what is expected of me as a member of the Administrative Council.	4	23.53	9	52.94	4	23.53	0	—	0	—
I find the activities involved in being a member of the Administrative Council personally challenging.	5	29.41	11	64.71	1	5.88	0	—	0	—
My role on the Administrative Council will require leading through significant changes in the life of our church.	8	47.06	7	41.18	2	11.65	0	—	0	—

Compared to the initial survey, the final survey results presented an overall positive change regarding the participants' understanding of their role on the Administrative Council. The *strongly agree* option increased by three, while the *agree* option fell by two and the *neutral* option fell by two. Those who joined the *strongly agree* ranks had selected *neutral* on the initial survey, indicating a significant change in their understanding of their role on the Administrative Council. The single *disagree* selection had selected *agree* on the Initial Survey, but it lies beyond the scope of this survey to determine the reason for this change.

The change from initial to final survey on the question regarding feeling well prepared for what is expected of the participants as members of the Administrative Council saw a positive change greater than the change in responses to the previous question. One initial survey *disagree* selection moved to *neutral*, and three initial survey

*agree* selections moved to *strongly agree*. Given that nearly 30 percent of the participants selected either *neutral* or *disagree* on the initial survey, the project intervention drove a marked increase in the participants' feelings regarding preparedness for serving on the Administrative Council.

When asked whether they found the activities of the Administrative Council personally challenging, the picture grew worse from the initial survey to the final survey, even though the results of the previous question might have suggested otherwise. The *strongly agree* selection gained one, the *agree* selection gained three, both fueled by participants who had previously selected *neutral*. Apparently feeling better prepared for the work of the council leads to the work being considered more personally challenging, even though logic would suggest the reverse. The work involved in identifying the reason or reasons for this change lie beyond the scope of this project.

In the initial survey, fourteen of the participants indicated that they believed that significant changes lie in the church's future by choosing either *strongly agree* or *agree*. In the final survey, one additional participant moved from *neutral* to *strongly agree*, so fifteen of the seventeen participants believed significant change lies ahead. With 88.23 percent of the participants anticipating significant change, the percentage of leaders who find the work of the council personally challenging is unsurprisingly high as well. Sixteen of the seventeen participants chose either *strongly agree* or *agree* when asked if they found the work of the Administrative Council personally challenging. In the initial survey, only twelve answered in the same manner (see Tables 4.8, p. 78, and Table 4.15).

When asked in the final survey to describe what aspects of their role on the Administrative Council they found personally challenging, their responses overall



followed much the same themes as the former replies but with more detail. The additional detail suggests that the participants had spent time considering this issue since they had completed the initial survey. As with the initial survey, the final survey text answers included eight references to conflict either directly or indirectly in phrases such as “criticism for decisions made by the council” or “dealing with people that just want to argue and not contribute.” The second most frequently mentioned issue was communications, either between members of the Administrative Council or between the council and the church at large. Several participants went deeper in their answers to the final survey question. For example, the participant who said “I don’t have a good working knowledge of the church yet,” on the initial survey said, “Getting all the information needed, sifting through opinions” on the final survey. Two participants did not reply to this question in the initial survey but did reply to the final survey. One said, “Feeling a sense of ownership and responsibility to our congregation” and the other said, “During this time of change at MSUMC, keeping congregants intelligently informed is challenging.” Both comments were well thought out and relevant, which indicated significant processing had taken place, since they had chosen not to answer the question in the initial survey.

The remainder of the issues mentioned—relationships, consensus building and unity, ownership, and personal leadership style—had three or fewer mentions. Three participants chose not to answer this question on the final survey, one more than chose not to answer on the initial survey. In addition, several issues mentioned in the initial survey—“I don’t have a good working knowledge of the church yet” and “speaking in front of people”—did not show up again in the final survey.

In summary, a diverse set of factors exists to cause the participants to consider their roles on the Administrative Council to be personally challenging. The changes in replies from the initial survey to the final survey suggest that participants have spent time considering what causes them challenges. Several have described those issues in more discrete terms, but overall the primary reason is still conflict.

Question 5 brought together the spiritual perspective and the participants' roles on the Administrative Council. Participants were asked how much their own spiritual lives have affected the way they fulfill their roles on the Administrative Council on a scale from 10 to 0. Positive movement was indicated in participants' responses to both questions, with the mean going from 7.61 to 8.12 for the first question and from 8.28 to 8.76 for the second question. On a ten-point scale, both increases are in the half-point range. While this increase may not be described as overwhelming, the mode value of 10 in the second question is especially encouraging as the value indicates the selection chosen most often when asked how willing a participant is to face the difficulties involved in leading change. Five participants chose 10 in the final survey, compared with three in the initial survey. This positive change is especially encouraging given the increase in the percentage of participants who believe significant changes lies ahead for the church (see Table 4.16).

**Table 4.16. Final Spiritual Life, Administrative Council, and Willingness to Face Difficulties**

Question	Sum	Mean	Median	Mode	SD
At this point, how much has your spiritual life affected the way you fulfill your role on the Administrative Council, with 10 being “the greatest amount possible” and 0 being “none”.	138	8.12	8	8.00	1.17
If you anticipate facing significant changes, how willing are you to face the resulting difficulties, with 10 being “totally willing” and 0 being “totally unwilling”.	149	8.76	9.00	10.00	1.30

Participants were asked in question 6 to identify what aspects of their spiritual lives affected the way they fulfilled their roles on the Administrative Council. In the initial survey, prayer and the role of values and beliefs were prominent. In the final survey, prayer was still listed the same number of times as the initial survey, but the remainder of the comments were far more diverse. Three referred to the intentional practice of spiritual beliefs, up from zero references in the initial survey. The remaining comments had two or fewer mentions—meditation (2), commitment (2), intentionality (2), small groups (1), forgiveness (1), loving others (1), and worship (1). With the exception of those who mentioned prayer again, most listed an issue or issues different from those they listed in the initial survey.

As expected, some of the themes discussed in the small group experience appeared in replies to this question. Intentionality, small groups, individual spiritual disciplines, spiritual gifts, and forgiveness were all discussed during the small group experience and showed up here, albeit in very limited numbers. In summary, the answers to this question suggest that the participants considered a broader range of potential

replies than they did on the initial survey. The activities involved in the project intervention most likely were the sources for these additional topics.

Questions 9, 21, and 22 address spiritual maturity, forgiveness, and financial sacrifice. The ability to forgive and the willingness to sacrifice financially are behaviors related to spiritual maturity (see Table 4.17).

The same four participants chose *neutral* again, but four who chose *strongly agree* on the initial survey instead chose *agree* on the final survey. The participant is the only one able define the distance from *strongly agree* to *agree* as he or she ponders the question, but nevertheless the data suggests that the project intervention presented information that caused four participants to downgrade their view of their own spiritual maturity. Interestingly, these four did not go below *agree*, suggesting that they now considered the bar for spiritual maturity to be somewhat higher than they considered it to be before the small group experience, but still believed they were doing pretty well.

A similar move occurred in the question regarding financial sacrifice. The only change from initial survey to final survey results was a move of two participants from *strongly agree* to *agree*. The same six chose the *neutral* option. Perhaps a similar dynamic is at play here, with participants realizing that financial sacrifice really requires more than they thought previously. Even so, they still considered themselves to be doing pretty well.

The overall response to the question regarding forgiveness saw a positive change, with two former *neutral* responses choosing *agree* on the final survey. While the overall position of the participants regarding forgiveness remains less than optimal with eight *neutral* and one *disagree* responses, at least two participants claimed a new positive perspective regarding their ability to forgive others. With less than half of the participants

choosing *agree* and none choosing *agree*, the responsibility Christians carry to forgive is an aspect of the leadership of the church that could use significant improvement.

**Table 4.17. Final Spiritual Maturity, Sacrificial Giving and Forgiveness**

Question	Strongly Agree		Agree		Neutral		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
I am a spiritually mature Christian.	1	5.88	12	70.59	4	23.53	0	—	0	—
I sacrifice financially to help others in my church and my community.	2	11.76	9	52.94	6	32.29	0	—	0	—
I can easily forgive others when their actions harm me.	0	—	8	47.06	8	47.06	1	5.88	0	—

The participants were asked to define spiritual maturity in question 23. As with the question regarding the impact of spiritual lives impacting their roles on the Administrative Council, the answers to this question were more diverse than on the initial survey, suggesting again that a broader range of potential issues was presented during the project intervention. The most frequent element in the responses to this question in the initial survey was relationships, but the specific mention of relationships in the final survey was nil. The theme of personal choice became prominent in the final survey replies, such as “intentionally reaching out with God to put the dimensions into their proper order” and “deliberate adjustment of my life to follow the will of God,” providing a deeper personal aspect to the suggested definition. Only one participant failed to reply to this question on the initial survey, but that participant wrote, “one who faithfully practices the spiritual disciplines listed above,” in his reply to the same question on the final survey.

If any theme exists in the final survey, it is the dual theme of understanding and intentionality. Seven participants referred to understanding either directly or indirectly in relationship to God, others and themselves. Five participants used either the term *intentional* or *deliberate* in reference to their human role in the maturing process. Most likely the activities involved in the project intervention drove the increased mention of understanding and especially intervention.

### **Research Question #3**

Which aspects of this experience contributed the most to the changes in participants' beliefs and attitudes regarding leading change?

Of the four experiences in the project—the initial survey, the *Congregational Vitality Assessment* (Dick 127), the small group experience, and the final survey—the small group experience was referenced by more participants than any other when asked what aspect of the project contributed to changes in their beliefs and attitudes. Participants mentioned the small group process either directly or indirectly nine times, meaning 52.94 percent of the participants ranked the small group experience as the most impactful. Specific references included “small group discussions,” “working and expressing my beliefs with others in the small groups,” and “fellowship with other dedicated members of our church.”

Related to the small group experience, four participants listed their weekly practice of the Wesley band meeting as the most impactful part of the total experience. Comments regarding the Wesley band experience included, “connecting with my accountability partner and the exchanges we have had,” “the band groups,” “sharing and growing through the Wesley band experience,” and, “asking the ‘How is it with your

soul?’ question.” Following discussion of Wesley’s use of society, class, and band, participants were asked to form Wesleyan bands of two or three and make an intentional connection weekly to ask each other Wesley’s question, “How is it with your soul?” Clearly the weekly interaction with their chosen band member or members was an impactful experience for 23.53 percent of the study participants.

Two participants mentioned the increased practice of spiritual disciplines as the most impactful aspect of their experience. Comments included, “trying to be more intentional with the spiritual disciplines,” and, “the sharing of ideas for spiritual growth and disciplines with my fellow parishioners.” While spiritual disciplines were mentioned by only 11.76 percent of participants, the impact should be noted.

Two participants also mentioned acquiring knowledge from the works of John Wesley that were used in the small group experience as the most impactful. The participants read and discussed Wesley’s “The Character of a Methodist” during the final small group session. Two participants spoke of the impact of Wesley’s work when asked what was the most impactful part of the experience—“learning more about Wesley” and more specifically, “reading *The Character of a Methodist*, particularly that a Methodist is not ‘distinguished by laying stress of religion on any single part of it.’” As with the mention of spiritual disciplines, the works of John Wesley had significant impact for 11.76 percent of the participants.

The responses to question 29, “What aspect of this experience has impacted you the most?” provided only four categories of responses—the small group experience, the Wesley band experience, the practice of spiritual disciplines, and gained knowledge from the work of Wesley. Two first categories were relational in nature, and the last two

categories were personal. The close grouping of replies to this open-ended question was significant, suggesting a common line of thought among the participants.

### **Summary of Major Findings**

The purpose of this research project was to evaluate the changes in beliefs and attitudes of the members of the Mineral Springs United Methodist Church Administrative Council towards their own spiritual lives and the challenges of leading change as a result of an assessment of church vitality and a four-week experience in spiritual formation. An initial survey and a final survey, along with a *Congregational Vitality Assessment* (Dick 127), and a four-week small group experience were utilized to generate and gather the data needed to answer the project's three research questions. The resulting major findings were developed through analysis of data gathered by the initial survey and final survey.

Initial findings regarding the participants' beliefs about their own spiritual lives suggested that they might have overly positive beliefs about their spiritual maturity. Both the initial and final surveys included questions that allowed participants to rate their own spirituality as well as questions that evaluated their spiritual maturity by measuring attributes such as generosity and forgiveness.

I identified four initial findings through analysis of research data. These four findings are presented here and explained further in Chapter 5:

1. When asked to describe their own spirituality, lay leadership typically rate themselves highly, but may, in fact, overestimate their own maturity.
2. Lay leadership indicated that they participate in an average of more than five of the classic spiritual disciplines on a daily or weekly basis. However, given other



measures of spiritual maturity in the project, the number of spiritual disciplines practiced may be an overestimation as well.

3. Lay leadership report finding their work on the Administrative Council personally challenging, even though they generally understand their roles and feel well prepared for the work.

4. Lay leadership long for spiritual relationships beyond the work of the Administrative Council.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION

#### Major Findings

Mineral Springs United Methodist Church has been a fixture in the community of Mineral Springs, North Carolina for more than a century. Blessed with a great location just south of Charlotte's relentless expansion, the church's location is a significant asset as Charlotte's affluence spreads south. In addition, the church has a laity that includes a significant number of people with leadership ability. While the church has seen decline in the last decade, Mineral Springs United Methodist Church has a legacy of successful ministry, resources that can be invested in growth, and a group of leaders with the desire to move the church forward.

The purpose of this research project was to evaluate the changes in beliefs and attitudes of the lay members of the 2015 Mineral Springs United Methodist Church leadership team towards their own spiritual lives and the challenges of leading change as a result of an assessment of church vitality and a 4-week experience in spiritual formation.

#### Spiritual Maturity

As the study began, thirteen of the eighteen participants either agreed or strongly agreed that they were mature Christians. Following the intervention, the four of the *strongly agree* category moved to *agree*, while the four who selected *neutral* did so again in the final survey. Interestingly, participants' responses to questions regarding basic Christian perspectives received much more positive answers. Initially, sixteen of the eighteen chose the top two positive replies when asked about their awareness of God's

presence on a daily basis. In the end, the same sixteen were unchanged. Seventeen of the eighteen viewed the Bible as “instructions for life,” and sixteen claimed to seek God’s guidance before making personal decisions and before making decisions as part of the Administrative Council. These same sixteen indicated that their sense of self was formed by their relationship with God that and their public and private selves were the same. All in all, the participants held very high views of their own level of spiritual maturity.

Furthermore, participants indicated a very high level of connection between their practice of spiritual disciplines and their decision-making processes. In both the initial and final surveys, sixteen participants chose the top two positive responses when asked if their daily decisions were affected by the spiritual disciplines they chose to practice daily or weekly. Seventeen of the eighteen participants chose the top two positive responses when asked if the way they answer questions about life and faith were affected by their practice of spiritual disciplines. Clearly, nearly all participants believe that their spiritual lives were greatly affected by the spiritual disciplines they chose to practice to the point that their decision making and dealing with life and faith issues were directly impacted.

However, when participants were asked about two indicators of spiritual maturity—sacrificial financial giving and forgiveness—their scores were much more telling. Six participants chose *neutral* when asked if they sacrifice financially to help their church and community. Eight participants chose *neutral* and one chose *disagree* when asked if they can easily forgive others when the action of others harmed them. Replies to these two questions, in both the initial survey and the final surveys, do not seem to describe the same group of spiritually mature Christians who provided very high marks when asked about their spiritual lives.

Lastly, the group did not provide consistent replies when asked in the initial survey to define spiritual maturity. Most gave answers that were vaguely spiritual, and two failed to mention God at all in their answers. If one routinely seeks God's guidance in decision making, is aware of God's presence on a daily basis, and actively practices a high number of spiritual disciplines, perhaps one should be able to provide a more robust definition of spiritual maturity. The participants' replies to this same question on the final survey were slightly more consistent.

Maas and O'Donnell say that a person could spend his or her adult lifetime reading, teaching, thinking, and writing about God and have no vital experience of God (11). While sixteen of the eighteen claimed to be aware of God's presence on a daily basis, one has to question the impact of that presence. Mass and O'Donnell go on to suggest that the degree of spiritual maturity present among laity and clergy alike today tends to be speculative, not experiential. As a result, the reality of God has become hypothetical even for many who would claim to be Christian if asked (Bloesch 13). The answers to questions about basic Christian perspectives seem to support the hypothesis put forth by Maas and O'Donnell, Bloesch, and others.

C. Smith's "moralistic therapeutic deism" may be part of the explanation of the gap between self-claimed maturity and reality (*Soul Searching* 124). If an individual believes that God's greatest desire for them is their own happiness, then maturity can fall short of actual forgiveness of others while maintaining the personal conviction that they have already reached maturity. As long as my own personal happiness is intact, I am under no conviction to forgive others, give sacrificially, or grow any further in my likeness to Christ. Wesley asked the relevant question regarding this issue in 1791: "Why

has Christianity done so little good, even among us?” (*Works* 116). As long as one holds to the belief that God’s desire is his or her own fulfillment in worldly terms, one need not concern themselves with further spiritual development.

The aforementioned gap points to the need for continual spiritual maturity. The will of God is clear regarding generosity and forgiveness, but the participants backed off in their self-assessment when asked about those two issues. In addressing the hesitancy, or perhaps outright unwillingness, to forgive others, participants in the study were side-stepping Wesley’s insistence that spiritual maturity is conduct, not doctrine. Participants’ doctrine was clearly stated in their replies to questions regarding basic Christian perspectives, but their ability to put that doctrine into action personally left room to grow.

In Ephesians 4:12-14, Paul admonishes his readers regarding the purposes for which spiritual gifts were given. Gifts provide the needed equipping in order to “do the work of ministry and for building up the body of Christ” to the point of spiritual maturity and family unity until Christians reach “the full measure of Christ” (Eph. 4:14, NSRV). The full measure of Christ would require one to be quick with forgiveness, both asked for and received, and sacrificial financial giving. Participants’ replies clearly demonstrated a gap between maturity and current conduct.

The biblical dynamic of spiritual formation requires intentional commitment, discipline, and action that results in growth of the whole person in the image of Christ, as suggested by Paul’s use of the *morphoo*’, meaning *formed* (LeClerq and Maddox 11). Paul’s belief was that spiritual development takes place in the midst of the life of the church, not beyond it. While Christians are called to be ambassadors of Christ beyond the walls of the church, their growth takes place within the life and practice of ministry in the

church itself. When one gives oneself wholly to the leading of the Holy Spirit, acknowledging the existence of gifts and the use of those gifts in growing maturity, one can make intentional steps towards maturity in partnership with the Holy Spirit, until “the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” is attained (Eph. 4:14).

The dynamic of formation is evident in the lives of the participants as members of Mineral Springs United Methodist Church. All but two of the participants indicated that they participate in ministries beyond serving on the Administrative Council, and a degree of maturity has been observed on many occasions as the sixteen leaders who do serve participate in various ministries of the church. No doubt they have all made progress in spiritual development, but their honest replies indicate the degree of spiritual formation still remaining to be done.

As many of the writers quoted reviewed in the literature have indicated, the lack of deep spirituality is not uncommon in contemporary Methodism. While Willow Creek is not a United Methodist church, Methodism could learn from its experience and brutal self-evaluation published in their recent *Reveal* study. Wesley’s “dead sect” warning predated Willow’s *Reveal* study by 222 years but said essentially the same thing (*Works* 315). Wesley described what could happen, that the church could become a place where religion was practiced but no personal transformations take place. Willow’s self-study indicated that this phenomenon has happened there, even in a church that is considered to be one of the leading congregations in the country. The decline of the Methodist church can be taken as an indication that Willow is not the only church whose ministries are not providing deep spiritual transformation. Sadly, Schaller and others suggest that the current Methodist system is designed to produce fewer congregations and fewer members

(Schaller 47). Such a system is clearly not designed to produce person spiritual transformation.

In reply to this finding, I believe the local church needs to be brutally self-evaluating. For far too long, the denomination has willingly suffered from Gladwell's "broken window theory," meaning they have digested their current broken condition to the point it is now seen as normal. Year after year, maintenance ministry is celebrated as success, indicating to all who are paying attention that nothing more is expected. Those leaders, laity and clergy alike, who are pushing for deeper experiences of God, greater transformation of people, and a true experience of Wesley's push for evangelism have experienced often mean-spirited pushback from those who do not want change (Herrington, Bonem, and Furr 7).

The denomination as a whole needs new methods of measuring the effectiveness of local churches, such as Dick's *Congregational Vitality Assessment* (Dick 127). The old methods of measuring success, such as the simple counting of attendance and unqualified financial growth, fall short of providing a comprehensive view of a church's condition. Dick's assessment should be a required step in the work done at year's end in preparation for charge conferences. Every local church should be required to work through Dick's book, take the assessment, and submit their compiled score to the conference. While such a requirement would no doubt be met with resistance, doing so would provide a level playing field for evaluating local church vitality in terms of growth and sustainability. Local churches whose Assessment scores fall below a set standard would then be required to participate in the denomination's *Paragraph 13 study*, a process that helps a church identify if the church can survive and return to viable ministry or if the church

needs to close its doors. Additionally, the conference should celebrate the work done by so-called “legacy churches”—congregations whose vitality has devolved to the point that viable ministry is no longer possible, so the congregation votes to give the remaining property and resources to a partner church in order for revitalization to occur under a new name and potentially new ministry setting.

On a personal level, clergy and local leaders should be given tools to assist in the conversation about how well the ministry of a local church is working in terms of enabling spiritual formation. Beyond Dick’s assessment as a starting point, tools should be developed to enable the measurement of spiritual depth in the life of a local church. The tools should address the impact of preaching, fellowship, educational efforts for all ages, as well as outreach efforts to provide a comprehensive analysis of the church’s ability to provide for spiritual growth. Willow’s learnings from the *Reveal* study could be informative as well.

### **Participation in and Impact of Spiritual Disciplines**

In the initial survey, participants reported daily or weekly participation in an average of 5.44 of the twelve classic spiritual disciplines. In the initial survey, this number increased to 5.58 spiritual disciplines. I considered 5.44 to be a high number, perhaps explained by the fact that the small group teaching on spiritual disciplines had not been done yet. I expected the number to go down as the participants discussed what the disciplines actually entail and developed a more realistic view of their own spiritual lives. I was proven wrong when the final survey number, following the teaching and discussion of spiritual disciplines, was even higher than the initial number. Granted it was only .14 higher, but it was higher nonetheless.



My literature review did not include any studies of the number of spiritual disciplines practiced by laity in leadership roles in local churches, so I lack a data point with which to compare my findings. However, I am able to report that prayer and worship were the two most practiced disciplines, with sixteen of the eighteen participants reporting regular engagement with the discipline of prayer. Solitude gained the largest increase from the intervention, moving from four to nine participants. This growth was interesting given the fact that solitude did not receive much discussion from the participants as it was described and offered as a potential topic of discussion during the small group experience.

The participants were asked to indicate which of the twelve classic spiritual disciplines they practiced daily, weekly, or monthly. We discussed each of the disciplines during the first session of the small group experience. Each week, I challenged them to engage in a practice they previously had not experienced. The following week, I asked them to share which discipline they selected and what their experience was during the previous week. Few of the participants engaged fully in this assignment. The ones who were willing to share had comments such as, “I tried to pray more,” or, “I read my Bible more than I typically do.” The discussions of the better known disciplines was a bit more spirited, but most of the participants failed to engage a new discipline actively each week as they were challenged to do.

The apparent lack of interest in intentionally engaging in a new discipline seems at odds with the participants’ answers to the two questions about the impact of spiritual disciplines in their lives. Sixteen or seventeen chose the top two positive replies when asked to describe the impact spiritual disciplines have on their daily decision-making and

the way they answer questions about life and faith. These answers would indicate a real connection between spiritual disciplines and the realities of life for nearly all of the participants, but their lackluster participation in new disciplines seems at odds with their earlier answers about the importance of spiritual disciplines.

While this finding is related to the previous finding, the two operate on different levels. The first finding is purely a personal belief about the status of their spiritual lives. This second finding is an indication of the amount of intentional time and energy the individual participant puts into the partnership of physical activities and spiritual engagement in the form of spiritual disciplines. One would surmise that the high number of disciplines reportedly practiced by the participants would result in very positive answers regarding basic Christian perspectives, and the data indicated so. However, I was somewhat surprised that this group of individuals struggles so much to practice forgiveness, as one would expect from a mature Christian. Willard's quoting of St. Francis of Assissi's assertion that mature Christians should "wear the world like a loose garment" seems to be out of reach for some of the participants (*The Spirit of the Disciplines* 94).

I have seen some of these leaders shy away from praying out loud, even in a small group of close friends. With sixteen of the eighteen reporting daily participation in the spiritual discipline of prayer, this hesitation is somewhat surprising. Perhaps they have come up short in allowing spiritual formation to be the "all encompassing endeavor" described so vividly by Willard (*Spirit* 152). Personality does play into the equation, but one who intentionally practices daily prayer should, over time, become more comfortable

with his or her own prayer life, and perhaps overcome any hesitancy when asked to pray out loud.

Participants were also asked to describe which aspects of their spiritual lives contributed to their work on the Administrative Council. The hoped-for goal of the question was to see if participants would describe their routine spiritual disciplines as being formative in their leadership. Eight of the eighteen included some sort of reference to spiritual disciplines in their open-text replies, leaving ten of the eighteen who did not mention spiritual disciplines either directly or indirectly. Taken together with the initial difficulty in defining spiritual maturity, these answers add credence to my assertion that participants overestimated their own spiritual maturity.

The participants' ability to define spiritual maturity improved slightly from the initial survey to the final survey. The final survey answers were somewhat more diverse, suggesting that the broad range of issues discussed during the small group experience gave them more fodder from which to answer the question. Interestingly, the concept of relationships was the most frequent answer in the initial survey, but did not show up at all in the final survey. The final survey answers indicated an increased awareness of or interest in personal choice. Several repeated Willard's line about maturity being the proper ordering of the dimensions of the human person, while one left out God entirely by defining spiritual maturity as "an ongoing experience" (*Renovation of the Heart* 41). I have seen these individuals behave in very mature ways, and I have seen some of them behave in ways that fall short of any definition of maturity. My resulting belief is that maturity is not a constant in the life of any human being. Anyone is capable of demonstrating significant maturity in one situation while demonstrating a decided lack of

maturity when faced with the same situation again. Likewise, all are guilty of giving self the priority that should rightly belong to God.

The implication of this finding should be an increased focus on spiritual disciplines in preaching, teaching, and discussion at all levels through the congregation. As with the first finding, some brutal self-assessment, as done at Willow in the *Reveal* study, would provide a baseline for planning. By combining increased exposure and education with increased expectations, perhaps a congregation could begin the work of spiritual maturation by the leadership who could then model the behaviors of spiritual maturity for the congregation at large.

### **The Challenges of Serving on the Administrative Council**

More than 70 percent of the participants found their work on the Administrative Council to be personally challenging. Five were neutral, perhaps indicating that they did, in fact, find the work personally challenging but for whatever reason were hesitant to say so. Nobody chose *disagree* or *strongly disagree*, clearly indicating to me that the work of serving as a lay member of the Mineral Springs Administrative Council is a difficult task. When asked to identify what caused them to find their work on the Administrative Council personally challenging, comments ranged from the obvious, “It is hard to please everybody,” to the more direct, “dealing with people that just want to argue and not contribute.” The cause of the difficulty stated most frequently was personal conflict.

Mineral Springs United Methodist Church was in the early stages of a revitalization of life and ministry when this project began. In 2014, the participants of this study approved the spending of nearly \$300,000 to remodel the Family Life Center for the launch of a new service in the late spring of 2015. The spending of a significant

amount of money can be a difficult thing in and of itself, but the spending of the money in this circumstance was perhaps made more difficult due to the fact that the pool of money from which the funds were drawn was an unrestricted gift of more than \$1.5 million given to the church in 2006. Many in the church viewed this money as the church's long-term source of security and were very hesitant to see any of the funds spent. One layperson who attended a contentious Administrative Council meeting in the fall of 2014 actually said, "I know the man who gave that money did so not wanting a penny of it to ever be spent." Clearly, these leaders fought a difficult battle to approve the spending of a significant amount of money for a new service as they have dealt with members of the church who are opposed to what the council views as the church's proper path into the future.

As they have worked to move Mineral Springs forward, the participants have run head-long into what Flowers and Vanhoy describe so clearly: "The insistence that the church's life be bent to the needs of the individual is active in every dying congregation" (128). The compiled results of the *Congregational Vitality Assessment* (Dick 127), which identified Mineral Springs as a "decaying church," were demonstrative in that the values gap at Mineral Springs was made evident. While rank and file church members would no doubt describe their church as friendly and welcoming, the lack of growth over the last two decades says otherwise. Flowers and Vanhoy would describe the congregation as preference centered rather than purpose centered (128). The participants should have not been surprised with the number of members who started attending Administrative Council meetings in late 2013 and into 2014 as the vision for the future began to be shared. Members came to council meetings and berated the council for bankrupting the

church, failing to remember who the foundational members of the church were, and not caring about the future of the church. One particularly bitter lady said that I had my “hand in the cookie jar and [the Pastor-Parish Relations Committee chair] was holding the lid open.” The council members faced negative comments regularly from a very vocal but thankfully small group of angry members of the church. These individuals were the living proof that Dick was right when he said that even though church members may claim to be guided by the proper values, often their behavior shows their true intentions of comfort, security and making sure what they prefer does not change (21).

The participants of this study have endured much in the name of progress at Mineral Springs United Methodist Church. That they find the work of the council personally challenging was not surprising. Perhaps that finding should be encouraging as it evidences the progress the church is making in moving into a more vital future. Dr. Gary Royals, the Metro District superintendent, commented to me that the work being done by the Administrative Council is “the ministry of deconstruction,” meaning the council is leading the effort to tear down structures that should never have been built in order to clear the foundation for new, more effective ministries.

The challenging work held in common by the lay members of the Administrative Council, difficult as the work may have been, has perhaps helped them realize the degree of spiritual formation present in some of the people they represent. The work of the Holy Spirit in sanctification is a life long process of maturing in Christ, and the council members have experienced the members of Mineral Springs at every possible point in that process. Wesley’s focus in spiritual formation was on conduct, and the conduct of some of the church members had definitely not demonstrated spiritual maturity. Their

actions have, at times, been abusive, accusatory and divisive. The council members have been challenged to show grace and to demonstrate a greater degree of maturity as they understand more and more that others have further to go in the process of maturity.

This finding is tied to the final finding in that the individual and shared spiritual maturity of the participants enabled them to deal with those who react in negative ways to their leadership. Paul's teachings regarding maturity, especially in Ephesians 4, clearly demonstrate the dynamic at play within the Administrative Council, a subgroup of the larger congregation of the church. The lay members of the council are increasingly aware that they are doing the work of ministry, showing grace and as a result building up the body of Christ, bringing both themselves as individuals and the congregation at large to a greater degree of unity, to paraphrase Paul from Ephesians 4. This work may accurately be described as "practical divinity," a phrase from Randy L. Maddox, as the lay members of the council show Christ to the rest of the church by their reactions to the actions, both positive and negative, of the congregation at large (16).

As the church moves forward, I need to recognize the significant impact of serving as a leader on those I have asked to serve in leadership positions. They are in the midst of their own spiritual journeys, and the challenges of leading may make journeys more difficult. I need to provide encouragement, support, and training for them in terms of council work and in terms of the spiritual impact of the council work on them as individuals. They have shouldered an increased load at my request, and they need an increased focus of care and leadership from me as a result.

This perspective of the increased burden on laity in challenging leadership positions should be on the radar of every appointed pastor. As clergy attend to their own

spiritual needs, clergy should be attentive to the increased challenge his or her lay leaders are experiencing in their own spiritual lives. The impact of leading may not be inconsequential, and the intentional focus of significant resources and support from clergy is well deserved.

### **The Need for Spiritual Relationships among Leaders**

The eighteen participants of this study are faithful members of Mineral Springs United Methodist Church. They attend one of the two weekly Sunday worship services and Sunday school and all but two are active in at least one other ministry in the life of the church. One might assume that being present for the primary worship and educational events of church life on a regular basis would somehow translate into spiritual maturity, but perhaps that is not the case. Willow's *Reveal* study certainly suggested that spiritual maturity is not the common outcome of participation in modern religious activities, as much as clergy might want that to be true. For an individual to reach maturity, he or she must intentionally attach themselves to others on the journey.

Pettit and others have written about the hard-wired human need to be in relationship and not function in isolation (103). Crabb talks of "luring people off the island to the mainland where connection is possible" and goes on to say that the church should be providing that connection (38). In Ephesians 2:19, Paul writes about "fellow citizens" and goes on to write about the creation of one new humanity where formerly two distinct people groups existed. The common thread throughout these writings and so many more is the need for shared experience that is part of every human being. Jesus prayed in the Gospel of John that his followers be brought "to complete unity" (John



17:23). His wording, and the experience of the participants in this study, suggests that much remains to be done to reach complete unity.

Prior to this study, the participants had no time in common other than monthly Administrative Council meetings. These meetings, typically lasting about ninety minutes, include little more than an opening prayer and the conducting of the business of the church. While the prayer and comments often refer to the spiritual nature of the work of the council, the overriding experience is one of business. The chair prefers to follow Robert's Rules of Order for decision-making. Given the history of council meetings at Mineral Springs, little time is typically given to matters of spirituality by the council members together.

The four-week small group experience provided the first time for the members of this council to come together without any business agenda for the purpose of study and growth. The group participated in activities based on the concepts of spiritual formation in the Wesleyan tradition as well as relevant teachings from Paul's writings in the book of Ephesians (see Appendix E). Time was given for discussion, and most of the four meetings ran long due to the desire to continue discussions. When asked what aspect of the experience had the most impact on them, eight of the eighteen included some reference to the small group experience in their open-text answers. Anecdotal evidence during each of the meetings made clear the impact of being together for the purpose of spiritual growth. During every meeting, comments were made such as, "We should continue meeting," "I wish we could do this every month at our Council meetings," or "I've really enjoyed learning together about Wesley."

The small group experience attempted to recreate a modern, short-term version of Wesley's bands for the participants. Wesley's favorite of his three structures was the band, the place reserved for those who had made the personal decision to seek a deeper faith experience (Henderson 115). The participants were challenged to form a band of no more than three other members of the study and to meet weekly and ask each other Wesley's question: "How is it with your soul?" Anecdotal evidence from conversations during the final small group time clearly showed that the experience was powerful for those who fully engaged in the process. In fact, one participant cited asking Wesley's question weekly as the most impactful part of the whole experience.

Willard includes "social context" in his description of the human person, meaning God placed a desire for relationships in the human experience (*Renovation* 36). Scazzero lists "social" as one of the components of the human person but fails to detail the full impact of forces outside the person (18). These dynamics of human interaction described by Willard and Scazzero were seen in the participants' responses related to their interaction as a group.

The desire for human relationships was seen clearly as the members of the Administrative Council found connection with each other as they participated in activities beyond the typical business agenda of the council. They failed to take some of the work seriously, such as the challenge to try a new spiritual discipline weekly, but they latched onto each other quickly. They realized that they had something in common, namely the shared suffering as members of the Administrative Council. Comments made during the small group times indicated that the participants' shared recognition of the challenge they face and the opportunity to grow spiritually together was a powerful first-time experience

for them. The participants' small group conversations clearly showed that the external forces they have in common were powerful motivators for them to grow and become more unified.

As a member of the same Administrative Council at his or her respective church, the pastor clearly should acknowledge the personal challenges faced by members of his or her council and provide opportunities for connection and growth outside of the council business at hand. I have been asked several times by study participants about my plans to get them together again to continue the conversations begun in the small group studies. Any church leadership team would benefit from intentionally spending time together for the purpose of spiritual growth without the pressure of the monthly council agenda.

### **Implications of the Findings**

If the findings of this study are generalizable across the broader United Methodist church, laity may be in leadership positions in many, many local churches who claim spiritual maturity but in actuality may lack the level of spiritual depth required to face the challenges of leading significant change in the local church. The reasons for this condition are as varied as the people and the churches themselves, but the impact has been considerable. The United Methodist Church is not what it once was, in terms of numbers or societal impact. Those in power, from the conference level down to the local church, seem to be hesitant to deal with those who are more concerned with comfort, security and preserving their own preferences to make any significant changes. If the church fails to acknowledge and address this situation, the decline will most likely continue unabated.

Given that Dick's work was unknown to the congregational vitality strategist responsible for leading revitalization efforts in the Metro District, I would suggest that the toolkit offered by those in conference leadership of congregational development may be outdated. Leadership of congregational development in the Western North Carolina conference office has changed since this study began, so perhaps that situation has been rectified. Those responsible for leading leaders towards revitalization need to be those who have succeeded in that work themselves. The tools they offer should be the absolute best available, tested and retested for applicability and effectiveness.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study was limited for the following reasons:

- The leadership team of only one congregation was studied.
- The small group experience only lasted four weeks.
- The Administrative Council included only eighteen individuals. Two were unable to complete the study.

First, the study involved the Administrative Council of only one United Methodist church. Admittedly, the circumstances of Mineral Springs United Methodist Church has much in common with other United Methodist churches of like size and age, the presence of the large financial gift does make Mineral Springs somewhat unique. Some of the pushback experienced by the participants was connected to the existence of the financial gift, so the experience of another church may differ.

Second, the small group experience only lasted four weeks. While survey data and anecdotal evidence both pointed to the formation of relationships and the benefits of focused time together away from the business of the council, a longer small group

experience would have allowed for the gathering of more granular data regarding the impacts of the study. I would expect that a longer small group experience would result in greater increases in some of the questions, such as the impact of spiritual disciplines and the ability to define spiritual maturity. While gains were made, larger gains may have been possible given a longer span of focused time together.

Third, the small number of participants may have resulted in less diversity of answers than would have been possible with a larger number of participants. Given that most of the leaders involved in the study have been in leadership positions for a long time—eight of them for more than eleven years—they have more than likely become very similar in their approach to the work of the council over the years. No doubt they are familiar with who in the congregation typically pushes back when changes are made.

### **Unexpected Observations**

I was most surprised by two things—the participants' admitted difficulties in forgiving others and the large number of spiritual disciplines regularly practiced by the participants. I have known these individuals for more than 2 ½ years as of the time of the study and have not known them to be unforgiving. As a result, when eight chose the neutral response and two disagreed when asked if they can easily forgive others when their actions were harmful, I was surprised. When they reported daily or weekly participation in more than five spiritual disciplines, I was surprised as well. I have seen very poor response to opportunities for small group studies, poor participation in group readings such as Easter or Advent devotionals, and other evidence of a lack of desire for intentional spiritual devotional activities. Perhaps I misread the response of the

congregation, or perhaps the participants were overly ambitious in indicating which disciplines they practiced.

### **Recommendations**

Dick's book, *Vital Signs: A Pathway to Congregational Wholeness*, should be on the required reading list for every pastor and every member of his or her leadership team. In addition to the book, the conference congregational development staff should develop a tool based on Dick's work for educating the pastor(s) and the Administrative Council of every local church, using Dick's assessment to evaluate the life and ministry of the church and a guided process for defining next steps should the church not find themselves in the quadrant labeled *vital*. A set of tools based on Dick's work would be a great step towards growth and sustainability for the 90 percent of churches who do not earn vital rating.

Clergy should also go to whatever lengths necessary to provide for shared spiritual growth experiences for his or her Administrative Council or leadership team. These experiences could include a focused small group experience such as the one done in this study, an annual shared conference experience such as the ones offered locally by The Cove at the Billy Graham Training Center, denominational or other sources such as Northpoint's Catalyst or Willow Creek's Global Leadership Summit. The leaders from a local church would travel together, eat together, stay together, attend the conference together, and then take the time to debrief all they experienced together before returning home. From my experience, debriefing after returning home does not provide the kinds of insights as debriefing does when it is done as a part of the time away. The financial investment would be small compared to the impact on the spiritual lives of the lay leaders

and on their individual commitment to lead well in the face of challenges. Long-term, the investment would provide tangible as well as intangible benefits for the church overall.

I realize attending conferences lies beyond the financial ability of many churches. For these churches, their conference should bring in speakers and provide for cost-effective opportunities for shared spiritual growth experiences by the clergy and lay leadership of churches suffering from financial hardship. These opportunities would provide far more benefit to the life and ministry of the local church than some of the programs historically offered by conference congregational development efforts. Simply being together and focused on spiritual formation, beyond the business agenda that provides the only connection for many leadership teams, is a powerful experience.

In addition to shared spiritual growth experiences, clergy should openly acknowledge the added burden of leadership shouldered by those who partner with him or her to lead the local church. The long march of monthly meetings can sap the spirit of even the most dedicated layperson, especially in a church aggressively working to deconstruct structures from the past that are no longer beneficial at best and toxic at worst. Those who lead should be thanked personally as well as publically, with attention given to those who take on specific leadership roles, such as the council chair and major committee chairs. A small thank-you goes a long way.

Early in my ministry, I was in the habit of writing small thank-you notes to six or eight people a week, thanking them even for small things. A good six months after I wrote a thank you note to a man named Wesley, I visited him and his wife in their home. As I walked into their den, I noticed that the mantle above their fireplace was covered with family photos and other items with sentimental value. A small space had been

cleared in the middle of the mantle, and the thank-you note I had sent Wesley was displayed there. Clearly, a small act of intentional thanks from the pastor may be more important than clergy realize.

Given the opportunity to repeat the study, I would make several changes. First, I would revise the surveys. I would ask more pointed questions about the participants' practice of spiritual disciplines and dig deeper into the connection between their faith and their work on the council. I would ask more questions about the behaviors that are evidence of spiritual maturity, not just the two questions I asked about forgiveness and financial giving. Second, I would extend the small group experience to at least eight weeks. While increasing the length of the study would no doubt require a greater level of commitment on the part of the participants, I believe the benefit would be greater than that provided by this study's four-week small group experience. After taking the assessment, every participant would be asked to read Dick's *Vital Signs* and be prepared to discuss it as part of the small group experience. Fourth, I would add focus group interviews to the data-gathering component of the project. Rather than using open-text questions to gather qualitative data, I would have been better served to have had focus groups so the participants could have discussed the questions about what they found challenging about serving on the council, how they defined spiritual maturity, and how their spiritual life informed their work on the council. The back-and-forth of focus group discussions would have been a rich source of data for analysis, as well as a point of connection for the participants in addition to the small group time together. Fifth, I would have involved at least two additional churches. Ideally, one church would have been larger than Mineral Springs and one church would have been smaller. The inclusion of



three churches would have allowed for comparison of findings among churches and the possible identification of drivers that were not possible to identify in studying only one church. Finally, I would have added an analysis of the leaders' perspectives on truth as revealed by God. While most of the leaders are boomers or older, the mission field we face is most definitely millennial and younger. The post-Christian worldview of those we are trying to reach, as compared to the somewhat more conservative worldview of the majority of the study participants, may be a driver of some of the challenges acknowledged by the participants. At the very least, I would be interested in some analysis of the worldview of the participants.

As noted previously, Mineral Springs is fairly unique in that the church still holds more than \$1 million of the large gift received in 2006. An interesting study would be to analyze the life of churches who have received substantial unrestricted financial gifts. The gift received by Mineral Springs has clearly been both blessing and curse, and I would like to see how other churches have fared after being blessed with significant resources.

### **Postscript**

When I arrived on campus as a brand new Beeson pastor in September 2010, I had a totally different research topic in mind. As part of a multicampus church from 2005-12, I was a member of the clergy teaching team. Four of us—the senior pastor and three campus pastors—spent significant time weekly, researching and writing sermons together. My research idea was to bring together a teaching team made up of clergy from four separate churches to see how an experience of collaborative sermon development affected their preaching. I still have a desire to do that research, but a topic much closer

to home surfaced in my heart as I fell in love with the people and ministry of Mineral Springs United Methodist Church after moving here in June 2012.

This church is uniquely blessed. Located just barely south of Charlotte's southern expansion, Mineral Springs has the best of both worlds—quick access to a world-class city but a rural lifestyle that is appealing to many who are weary of living in urban areas. Mineral Springs has horse farms and family estates, as well as new developments of McMansions as Charlotte creeps nearer. The schools are the envy of much of the state, with families relocating from near and far to get their kids into Union County schools. The roads are not crowded, the pace of life is a little slower, but Charlotte is only thirty minutes away. The Urban Institute says the Charlotte region will grow by 47 percent between 2010 and 2030, and I believe that Mineral Springs is just one of the many towns where that growth is going to occur (Troyer). The church occupies one corner of the crossroads of Mineral Springs, has excellent facilities, and has significant financial resources to bring to bear as the church prepares for the future.

The pastor I followed, Bruce Gwyn, told me that prior to my arrival that Mineral Springs had leadership capacity that exceeded any church this size he had ever seen. I have come to believe that Bruce was telling me the truth. The leaders I inherited, those in place when I got here, are all dedicated people who love this church and community. The leaders I have recruited have taken their place within the ranks of existing leaders and have fit in well.

All in all, the future is bright at Mineral Springs, provided we do not lose sight of the mission of the church. We exist to make disciples and transform the world. While the making of disciples is understood by many to be exclusively outward focused, Scripture

says different. Those in church leadership have to provide for the care of the disciples who already exist if they are to have any hope of reaching those who have yet to belong. The church must be diligent in two directions – internally, as we love and care for the family, and, externally, resources are brought to bear in the challenge of reaching the community for Christ. I echo the mission statement that was adopted by Mineral Springs United Methodist Church years ago—*Live For Jesus, Grow Disciples, Change the World*. My prayer is that the life and ministry of Mineral Springs United Methodist Church seek to make this statement a reality.

## APPENDIX A

### INFORMED CONSENT LETTER

#### *Vitality in the Local Church: Spiritual Formation and Lay Leadership*

You are invited to participate in a research study being done by Tom Mabry from Asbury Theological Seminary. You are invited because you are a lay member of the 2015 Administrative Council at Mineral Springs United Methodist Church.

If you agree to be in the study, you will be asked to

- Complete a 24-question *Congregational Vitality Assessment* about the current state of Mineral Springs United Methodist Church;
- Complete a 37-question questionnaire about your spiritual life and your experience as a member of the Administrative Council at Mineral Springs;
- Participate in a once-a-week small group for 4 weeks, and;
- Complete a final 29-question questionnaire about your spiritual life, your experience as a member of the Administrative Council at Mineral Springs and the potential impact from the small group experience.

The four-week small group experience will be scheduled to best fit the availability of the group.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. My hope is that you complete the entire study, but you are free to withdraw at any point for any reason.

***Please note that your replies to the church assessment and the two surveys will be completely anonymous.***

If you have questions about this study at any time, you can reach me at (---) --- - -  
--- or by e-mail at -----.

Signing this paper indicates your agreement to participate in the study. Remember, your participation is voluntary and you may withdraw at any point for any reason. Thank you for assisting me with this research.

Date \_\_\_\_\_

**LAY MEMBER, MSUMC 2015 ADMINISTRATIVE COUNCIL**

## APPENDIX B

### INITIAL SURVEY

1. **I have a clear understanding of what is expected of me in my role on the Administrative Council.**

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

2. **I find the activities involved in being a member of the Administrative Council to be personally challenging.**

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

3. **In what ways has your experience as a member of the Administrative Council been personally challenging?**

[ ] text box

4. **I feel that I am well prepared for what is expected of me as a member of the Administrative Council.**

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

5. **At this point, how much as your spiritual life affected the way you fulfill your role on the Administrative Council, with 10 being “the greatest amount possible” and 0 being “none”?**

☐ 10 ☐ 9 ☐ 8 ☐ 7 ☐ 6 ☐ 5 ☐ 4 ☐ 3 ☐ 2 ☐ 1 ☐ 0

6. **If your spiritual life has affected the way you fulfill your role on the Administrative Council, what aspects of your spiritual life were responsible for the impact?**

[ ] text box

7. **My role on the Administrative Council will require leading through significant changes in the life of our church.**

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

- 8. If you anticipate facing significant changes, how willing are you to face the resulting difficulties, with 10 being “the greatest amount possible” and 0 being “none”?**

☐ 10 ☐ 9 ☐ 8 ☐ 7 ☐ 6 ☐ 5 ☐ 4 ☐ 3 ☐ 2 ☐ 1 ☐ 0

- 9. I am a spiritually mature Christian.**

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagr

- 10. I am aware of God’s presence on a daily basis.**

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

- 11. Which of the following spiritual disciplines are par of your regular schedule?**

☐ Prayer

☐ Meditation

☐ Fasting

☐ Study

☐ Simplicity

☐ Submission

☐ Soltitude

☐ Service

☐ Confession

☐ Worship

☐ Guidance

☐ Celebration

- 12. Of the disciplines you checked above, indicate how often you practice that discipline.**

☐ Prayer [ ] text box

☐ Meditation [ ] text box

☐ Fasting [ ] text box

☐ Study [ ] text box

☐ Simplicity [ ] text box

☐ Submission [ ] text box

☐ Solitude [ ] text box

☐ Service [ ] text box

☐ Confession [ ] text box

☐ Worship [ ] text box

☐ Guidance [ ] text box

☐ Celebration [ ] text box

**13. Generally speaking, my public self and my private self are the same.**

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

**14. My sense of self—who I am and how I live—is formed by my relationship with God.**

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

**15. I believe the Bible is God's Word.**

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

**16. I believe the Bible provides instructions for life.**

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

**17. The decisions I make on a daily basis are affected by the spiritual gifts I engage in.**

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

**18. The way I answer questions about life and faith are informed by the spiritual disciplines I engage in.**

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

**19. When making decisions that affect my personal life, I seek God's guidance first.**

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

**20. When making decisions as part of the Leadership Team, I seek God's guidance first.**

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

**21. I can easily forgive others when their actions harm me.**

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

**22. I sacrificially contribute financially to help others in my church and community.**

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

**23. How would you define spiritual maturity?**

[ ] text box

**24. What is your age?**

☐ 18-24

☐ 25-34

☐ 35-44

☐ 45-54

☐ over 55

**25. Please indicate your gender.**

☐ female

☐ male

**26. Do you consider yourself a Christian?**

☐ yes

☐ no

**27. If you answered yes to the previous question, how old were you when you became a Christian?**

☐ less than 18

☐ 19-24

☐ 25-34

☐ 35-44

☐ 45-54

☐ over 55



**28. Are you a member of Mineral Springs UMC?**

☐yes

☐no

**29. If you answered yes to the previous question, how long have you been a member of Mineral Springs UMC?**

☐less than 5 years

☐6-10 years

☐11-15 years

☐more than 15 years

**30. If you answered “no” to the previous question, are you a member of another church?**

☐yes

☐no

**31. If you answered “no” to the question about membership at Mineral Springs UMC, have you ever been a member of a church?**

☐yes

☐no

**32. How many years have you served in a leadership role at Mineral Springs UMC?**

☐0-2

☐3-6

☐7-10

☐11 or more

**33. In addition to serving on the Administrative Council, do you serve in an active ministry at Mineral Springs United Methodist Church?**

☐yes

☐no

## APPENDIX C

### FINAL SURVEY

1. **I have a clear understanding of what is expected of me in my role on the Administrative Council.**

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

2. **I find the activities involved in being a member of the Administrative Council to be personally challenging.**

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

3. **In what ways has your experience as a member of the Administrative Council been personally challenging?**

[ ] text box

4. **I feel that I am well prepared for what is expected of me as a member of the Administrative Council.**

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

5. **At this point, how much as your spiritual life affected the way you fulfill your role on the Administrative Council, with 10 being “the greatest amount possible” and 0 being “none”?**

☐ 10 ☐ 9 ☐ 8 ☐ 7 ☐ 6 ☐ 5 ☐ 4 ☐ 3 ☐ 2 ☐ 1 ☐ 0

6. **If your spiritual life has affected the way you fulfill your role on the Administrative Council, what aspects of your spiritual life were responsible for the impact?**

[ ] text box

7. **My role on the Administrative Council will require leading through significant changes in the life of our church.**

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

- 8. If you anticipate facing significant changes, how willing are you to face the resulting difficulties, with 10 being “the greatest amount possible” and 0 being “none”?**

☐ 10 ☐ 9 ☐ 8 ☐ 7 ☐ 6 ☐ 5 ☐ 4 ☐ 3 ☐ 2 ☐ 1 ☐ 0

- 9. I am a spiritually mature Christian.**

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagr

- 10. I am aware of God’s presence on a daily basis.**

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

- 11. Which of the following spiritual disciplines are par of your regular schedule?**

☐ Prayer

☐ Meditation

☐ Fasting

☐ Study

☐ Simplicity

☐ Submission

☐ Solitude

☐ Service

☐ Confession

☐ Worship

☐ Guidance

☐ Celebration

- 12. Of the disciplines you checked above, indicate how often you practice that discipline.**

☐ Prayer [ ] text box

☐ Meditation [ ] text box

☐ Fasting [ ] text box

☐ Study [ ] text box

☐ Simplicity [ ] text box

☐ Submission [ ] text box

☐ Solitude [ ] text box

☐ Service [ ] text box

☐ Confession [ ] text box

☐ Worship [ ] text box

☐ Guidance [ ] text box

☐ Celebration [ ] text box

**13. Generally speaking, my public self and my private self are the same.**

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

**14. My sense of self—who I am and how I live—is formed by my relationship with God.**

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

**15. I believe the Bible is God's Word.**

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

**16. I believe the Bible provides instructions for life.**

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

**17. The decisions I make on a daily basis are affected by the spiritual gifts I engage in.**

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

**18. The way I answer questions about life and faith are informed by the spiritual disciplines I engage in.**

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

**19. When making decisions that affect my personal life, I seek God's guidance first.**

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

**20. When making decisions as part of the Leadership Team, I seek God's guidance first.**

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

**21. I can easily forgive others when their actions harm me.**

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

**22. I sacrificially contribute financially to help others in my church and community.**

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

**23. How would you define spiritual maturity?**

[ ] text box

**1. How much have you grown spiritually through this process, with 10 being “the greatest amount possible” and 0 being “none”?**

☐10 ☐9 ☐8 ☐7 ☐6 ☐5 ☐4 ☐3 ☐2 ☐1 ☐0

**2. Based on your response to Question 24, how much do you expect the growth you have experience will impact the way you fulfill your role on the Administrative Council, with 10 being “the greatest amount possible” and 0 being “none”?**

☐10 ☐9 ☐8 ☐7 ☐6 ☐5 ☐4 ☐3 ☐2 ☐1 ☐0

**3. I have a plan for continuing my spiritual growth.**

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

**4. What specific activities are part of your plan for continued spiritual growth?**

[ ] text box

## APPENDIX D

## CONGREGATIONAL VITALITY ASSESSMENT DAN R. DICK

*Congregational Vitality Assessment for Mineral Springs UMC*

Please provide your thoughts about the current state of the life and ministry of Mineral Springs UMC by answering each question below. Your answers will be completely confidential. Once all surveys are returned, I will compile the answers and destroy the original survey forms.

***If at all possible, can I get your completed survey back by the end of the day this Friday?*** I want to review the compiled results together during Session Two on Sunday, Feb. 15<sup>th</sup>.

You can return the survey by postal mail, drop it off at the church office Monday-Friday 8:30-4 or in the black mailbox by the back office door any time.

For each question, circle the response that you believe best describes Mineral Springs UMC. If you aren't sure of the answer, please circle the answer that you believe to be correct.

***Growth Factors*****1. Membership in our church has:**

Declined for the past 3 years	Declined in the past year	Increased in the past year	Increased for the past 3 years
----------------------------------	------------------------------	-------------------------------	-----------------------------------

**2. Attendance in our church has:**

Declined for the past 3 years	Declined in the past year	Increased in the past year	Increased for the past 3 years
----------------------------------	------------------------------	-------------------------------	-----------------------------------

**3. Participation in Christian education opportunities have:**

Declined for the past 3 years	Declined in the past year	Increased in the past year	Increased for the past 3 years
----------------------------------	------------------------------	-------------------------------	-----------------------------------

**4. The number of non-members served by our congregation has:**

Declined for the past 3 years	Declined in the past year	Increased in the past year	Increased for the past 3 years
----------------------------------	------------------------------	-------------------------------	-----------------------------------

**5. The percentage of active members in our congregation is between:**

0-55%	56-70%	71-85%	86-100%
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**6. The number of distinctly different worship service options in our congregation is:**

1	2	3-5	More than 5
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**7. The number of ongoing outreach ministries of our congregation is:**

0-3	4-9	10-15	More than 15
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**8. Financial support through participant giving for the past three years has:**

declined	Increased less than 10%	Increased 10-25%	Increased more than 25%
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**9. Awareness of our ministry and mission throughout the surrounding community is:**

Very low	low	high	Very high
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**10. Visitors to our congregation:**

Generally come only once	Usually return at least once	Usually return regularly	Generally become involved in the ongoing ministry
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**11. We contact visitors:**

Not at all	By letter or phone within a week	Personally, within 36 hours	Personally, within 6 hours
------------	----------------------------------	-----------------------------	----------------------------

**12. We offer age-specific ministries to:**

1 or 2 age groups	3 age groups	4 age groups	More than 4 age groups
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***Stability Factors*****13. The percentage of active members in leadership positions is:**

0-15%	16-35%	36-55%	56-100%
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**14. The percentage of the congregation with a clear, shared understanding of the mission of the UMC is:**

Less than 10%	11-40%	41-75%	More than 75%
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**15. The percentage of the congregation with a clear, share vision for ministry is:**

Less than 10%	11-40%	41-75%	More than 75%
---------------	--------	--------	---------------

**16. Hours leadership spends per week in meetings (planning, governing, staff, etc.)**

More than 5	4-5	3-4	Less than 3
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**17. Hours leadership spends per week in Christian formation (prayer, study, faith sharing, etc.)**

Less than 3	3-4	4-5	More than 5
-------------	-----	-----	-------------

**18. Percentage of total ministry and program taking place offsite (away from church building or buildings):**

Less than 10%	10-20%	20-30%	More than 30%
---------------	--------	--------	---------------



**19. We address the financial needs of the congregation using:**

No special efforts	Annual campaign	Regular asking/appeals	Conversation/relationships
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**20. Our primary measure of effectiveness or success is:**

Growth in numbers attending	Growth in numbers of those involved in leadership	Growth in numbers of people served	Growth in the spiritual commitment and faith formation in people's lives
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**21. Worship, education, fellowship and service opportunities are:**

Independent program emphases of the congregation	Loosely related in focus, but developed independently	Coordinated to support the primary focus of our congregation	Tightly integrated, designed and implemented collaboratively
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**22. The number of hours the pastor(s) works per week on average:**

80-70	70-60	60-50	50-40
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**23. The location of our church facility is:**

Vital to the success of our ministry	Very important to the success of our ministry	Nominally important to the success of our ministry	Unrelated to the success of our ministry
--------------------------------------	---	--	--

**24. The charisma, energy, and image of the pastor(s) is:**

Vital to the success of our ministry	Very important to the success of our ministry	Nominally important to the success of our ministry	Unrelated to the success of our ministry
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Thank you for taking the time to complete the Congregational Vitality Assessment.

**APPENDIX E**  
**MINERAL SPRINGS ADMINISTRATIVE COUNCIL**  
**SMALL GROUP EXPERIENCE**

*Spiritual Formation, the Book of Ephesians and John Wesley*

*Session One*

***I. Congregational Vitality Assessment***

***II. Introduction to Spiritual Formation***

***III. John Wesley's Approach to Spiritual Formation***

***IV. Spiritual Disciplines***

***V. The Book of Ephesians***

1. We are loved by God the Father (Eph. 1:4-6)
2. Our lives were paid for by Christ (Eph. 1:11-12)
3. Our lives were marked by the Holy Spirit (Eph. 1:13-14)

***VI. Next Steps***

1. Pick one or two others from our study group to form a Wesley Band. Check in at least once this week with Wesley's question "How is it with your soul?" A list of participants is in the back of this booklet.
2. Pick a spiritual discipline that has not been part of your spiritual life thus far. Add that discipline to your daily routine for the coming week.

## ***Session Two***

- I. Spiritual Formation (continued from Session One)***
- II. Congregational Vitality Assessment Results***
- III. The Book of Ephesians***  
Ephesians 4:1-7  
Ephesians 4:8-16
- IV. Review of Spiritual Discipline experiences and Wesley Band experiences***
- V. Next Steps***
  1. Check in at least once this week with the members of your Wesley Band with Wesley's question "How is it with your soul?"
  2. Pick another spiritual discipline that has not been part of your spiritual life thus far. Add that discipline to your daily routine for the coming week. You can practice it in addition to or in place of the discipline you added last week.

### *Session Three*

***I. Questions from last week***

***II. The Corporate Nature of Spiritual Disciplines***

***III. The Book of Ephesians***

Rules for New Life (Eph. 4:25-32)

Children of the Light (Eph. 5:8-14)

Wisdom (Eph. 5:15-20)

***IV. Review of Spiritual Discipline experiences***

***V. Next Steps***

1. This is your final week to check in with your Wesley Band with Wesley's question "How is it with your soul?".
2. Pick a third spiritual discipline that has not been part of your spiritual life thus far. Add that discipline to your daily routine for the coming week. You can practice it in addition to or in place of the disciplines you have already tried.
3. Read John Wesley's "The Character of a Methodist" before Session Four. The text is in the back of this booklet. Bring questions to Session Four!

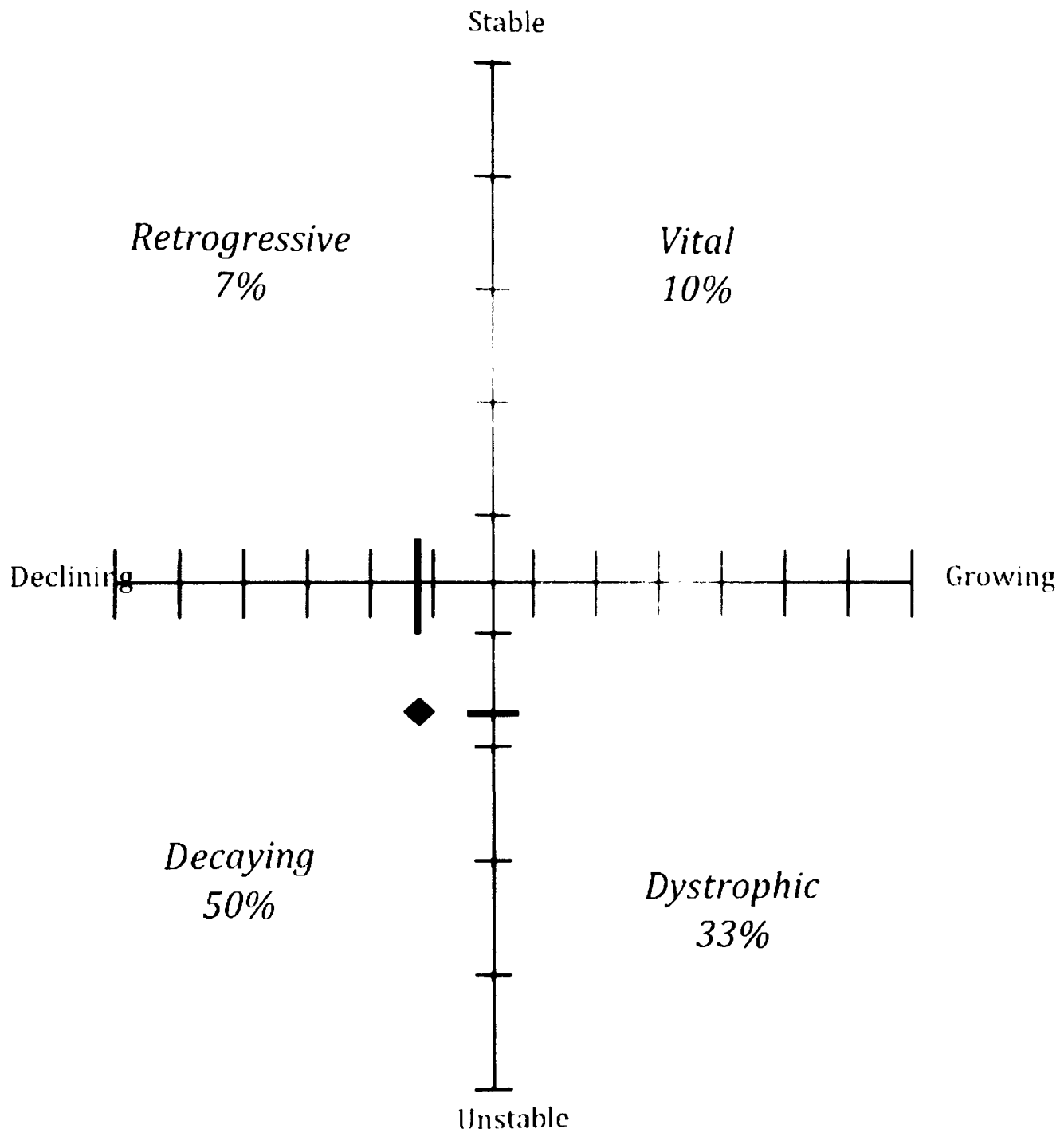
***Session Four***

- I. Questions from last week?***
- II. John Wesley's "The Character of a Methodist"***
- III. The Book of Ephesians***  
The Whole Armor of God (Eph. 6:10-20)
- IV. Review of Four Weeks of Spiritual Disciplines***
- V. A Final Prayer (Eph. 3:14-21)***

## APPENDIX F

### CHURCH VITALITY SNAPSHOT

Congregational Vitality Assessment Results  
for Mineral Springs UMC  
Feb. 2015



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